

A BRIDE FOR
Hawk

THE SHERIFF'S MAIL ORDER BRIDE

CAT CAHILL

A Bride for Hawk
The Sheriff's Mail Order Bride, Book
4

by Cat Cahill

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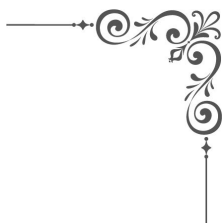
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Chapter One

SWEETWATER, KANSAS—APRIL 1872

The latest convulsions had been the worst so far.

Carolina Groves drew the bedcovers up to her brother Matthew's chin before laying a hand on his forehead. She didn't know why she did this—he never had a fever with the convulsions, but it was one of the few things she could remember her mother doing when either she or Matthew fell ill as small children.

His skin was cool to the touch and he breathed normally, and for that, Lina was thankful. Matthew had been sitting down this time when it had happened, and she'd been nearby. When the convulsion began, she had tossed her mixing spoon and ran to catch his arms as he'd shaken and fallen helplessly onto the old armchair in front of the fire. And when it finished, their kindly neighbor Mr. Bauer had carried Matthew to the bed.

And there he'd laid for two days now, still too tired and weak to do more than sit up and sip water or broth.

She feared the convulsions would be the death of him if he didn't receive help soon. But help beyond locking him away in an asylum—which Lina would sooner die herself than do—required money. And money was the one thing they didn't have.

Dusk closed in outside, casting dark shadows through the two small windows in the front of the one-room home. Lina lit the lamp at the table across the room, dimming the flame as much as possible to avoid waking Matthew. After gathering a meager supper of bread and cheese, she sat to eat and search the newspaper the Bauers had passed on to her for work opportunities.

She took in laundry for a few large, overwhelmed families in town, but if she were going to get Matthew the help he required,

she needed more. A *lot* more. Drawing the lamp closer, Lina skimmed the advertisements.

Needed: Seamstress.

Wanted, shopkeeper's assistant.

Required immediately, a genteel young lady to serve as a companion.

Lina blew out a sigh. She didn't know what she hoped she would find, but these weren't it. All of them required her to be away from Matthew from sunrise to sunset. She could persuade Mrs. Bauer to let him stay with her family, but to what end? None of these positions paid what she needed to both survive and save funds for medical treatment—not quickly enough, at least. It would be years before she could put enough coins away to help Matthew.

And by then, it could be too late.

She turned the page, hoping against hope that some perfect opportunity might appear. Instead, she was met with advertisements for marriage.

Lina laughed out loud, quickly smothering the sounds with her hand. She was exactly what some poor, lonesome soul needed—a woman entrusted with the care of a brother, with no money, no family connections, and a late father whose assumed name would send most men fleeing in fear.

And yet, as she skimmed the matrimonial advertisements, she felt an odd kinship with the men who'd submitted them. Yes, she had Matthew, and she had friends in the Bauers, but a part of her heart yearned for love. It was a foolish desire, she knew, and one she didn't dare indulge lest she forget her duties.

Lina was just about to turn the page when something in the very last advertisement caught her eye. She squinted at the words in the lamplight.

Hardworking, respected lawman in Perseverance, Colorado Territory, aged 28, seeking cheerful and sturdy young woman for marriage. Must be of an honest and Christian nature.

The advertisement went on to describe the gentleman as being of taller stature with brunette hair and brown eyes. But it wasn't the man's description of himself that caught Lina's attention.

Jumping up from her chair, she crossed the few steps to a shelf mounted on the wall. Beside a framed photograph of her mother, Lina snatched a small, simply-designed wooden box and brought it back to the table.

From inside, she retrieved a folded snippet of newsprint and a

carefully creased letter. The letter she had memorized months ago, after it had arrived. It was her father's last missive to both Lina and Matthew. The section cut from newspaper, however, she unfolded now and pressed flat against the table. She skimmed the painful words once again.

The outlaw Joseph Grayson, wanted in two states and this territory for crimes committed against various persons, the Heartfield Overland Stage Company, and the Colorado & New Mexico Railway Company, was killed yesterday evening by a gunshot wound to the chest. County sheriff Henry "Hawk" Rodgers led the ambush against the outlaw and his gang. Holed up in the mountains above Perseverance, the sheriff and his men made quick work of the outlaws after a parlay between Sheriff Rodgers and Mr. Grayson was unsuccessful. The shooting began before the sheriff returned from his rendezvous with the outlaw Grayson, when one of the Sheriff's deputies saw Grayson raise a gun. The outlaw was killed instantly. His men were also killed, although a few escaped and remain at large.

Lina drew in a sharp breath upon reading about her father's demise yet again. It hurt as if it had happened yesterday, despite the fact that nearly six months had passed since she'd read the news in the paper that Mr. Bauer had brought back for her. Only the Bauers knew that Joseph Grayson was Joseph Groves. Her father had thought of everything, including ensuring that his children did not need to bear his sins through their surname.

Lina ran her finger down the article again, pausing underneath the name of the town. Perseverance. Glancing at the more recent newspaper in front of her, she located the advertisement from the lawman in Colorado.

Perseverance.

Lina sat back, biting her lip as she tensed her fingers around the edge of the table. It couldn't be a coincidence. It was too strange a name for that to be the case.

Was it possible that this man advertising for a bride could be this Henry Rodgers, the sheriff who was the last man to speak with and see Lina's father?

Her heart picked up speed as she contemplated the possibility. What if she were to...? No, she couldn't.

Could she?

She glanced at the advertisement again. She was a young woman, cheerful when the worry didn't seem to eat her alive, and,

she supposed, sturdy enough. After all she laundered other people's linens each day along with caring for her own home. She was honest—or at least she was right now. And she tried to be of a Christian nature.

She fit the fellow's description perfectly. Except, of course, for the simple fact that she was the daughter of an outlaw he had chased and cornered.

Lina stood abruptly, feeling the need to move as she thought. She paced across the small area, quiet enough so as not to awaken Matthew. If she were to write to this man, and if he were to find her acceptable, then she would have an opportunity to discover the one thing she had wondered all these months.

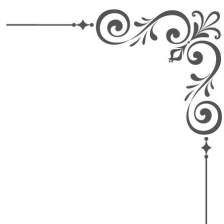
Where was her father's treasure?

He'd written to her and Matthew of it in that last letter he sent. And he had promised to find a way to get it to them in order for Matthew to receive the medical treatment he so badly needed and to relieve some of the burden of merely existing from Lina's shoulders.

However, he had died before getting it to them. She could not imagine him facing death, only to take that secret to the grave. He loved them far too much to do such a thing. He must have told someone, even a stranger. Even the sheriff who intended to see his surrender.

Lina rested her hands against the table as the plan formed in her mind. She would write to this man. The words in the newspaper indicated he was not responsible for Papa's death—that would be something Lina didn't think she could abide. She would travel west to meet him. And then, with any luck, she would find out where her father had left the money that would save Matthew's life.

Because she would do anything for her brother, even marry a man she didn't know.



Chapter Two

PERSEVERANCE, COLORADO Territory—August 1872

The stagecoach should have arrived an hour ago.

Costilla County Sheriff Henry “Hawk” Rodgers scowled at his pocketwatch before shoving it back into the pocket of his trousers. Trust the usually prompt conveyance to be delayed on the day he was expecting it to deliver something of great importance. It was as if God knew he was too eager and wanted to give him a lesson in patience.

The minutes ticked by slowly as Hawk shuffled papers on his desk in a pretense of accomplishing work. Approximately the sixth time he stood to glance out the window—and just as he was deciding how much time would need to pass before he went out looking for the missing coach—Rafe Garland, his regular deputy, burst through the office door.

“Hawk!” he yelled before noticing Hawk was standing right there at the window. “Some prospector came down from the mountains and said the stage was felled up at the Pass.”

“Felled?” Hawk repeated, picturing the coach lying wheels up like a tree chopped down for timber.

“On its side,” Garland confirmed. “The fellow also said there might’ve been a gang of men that helped get it that way, but he didn’t know for certain and he wasn’t getting close enough to find out.”

Hawk had already reached for his hat. “Round up the men. Let’s get on up there.”

Garland nodded and disappeared out the door.

In less than twenty minutes, they were leaving Perseverance, quiet in the daylight hours with hardworking folks going about

their business, and heading up into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that rose above the town to the east. Horsethief Pass was a solid two hours' ride up into the mountains. The road, just barely wide enough for a stagecoach to pass, started with a gentle incline before switching to a steeper set of switchbacks. Prospectors' tents dotted the landscape behind aspens and pines, clinging to the edge of mountain along Navarro Creek. Gold fever had hit the area hard a few years ago, flooding the area with men of all sorts. Thanks to a few noted finds, it hadn't let up yet, but, Hawk was proud to say, Perseverance was a much safer place to lay one's head at night than it was when he was sworn in as county sheriff two years ago.

Now if he could only extend that success to the rest of the county.

When they grew close to the pass, Hawk motioned for the group to stop. Young Billy Morrell slid from his horse, and with a nod from Hawk, crept forward until he disappeared into the trees.

Minutes stretched on, until Hawk thought for certain Billy had either fallen down the mountain or had, inconceivably, been spotted. Finally, Billy reappeared as quietly as he'd left, but this time with a grin the size of the sky above plastered across his face.

"Found it," he said. "And you won't believe what I saw."

Hawk raised an eyebrow. The outlaws—if there were any—must be long gone.

"You gonna tell us?" Garland asked, impatience lacing his voice.

"Them fellas must've gotten the shotgun messenger, but standing aside the stage was a lady, hair yellow as the sun, with a man trussed up at her feet and her holding a pistol on him." Billy's voice conveyed the awe and respect it was clear he held for this woman.

Rafe caught Hawk's eye. "You don't think . . .?"

Hawk shrugged, an attempt to look nonchalant even as his thoughts tumbled over one another. Miss Groves had described herself as fair-haired, and he'd certainly asked for a capable woman—although he'd had cooking and keeping house more in mind with that description than holding road agents at bay with a pistol.

"Let's get up on there," he said, motioning to the rest of the men to move forward.

Billy led the way, and before too long, they'd come upon the scene. Hawk immediately looked to the boulders and large rock outcroppings that surrounded the road that cut through this part of

the mountains. Many a man had passed through here and lost his horse, his wallet, and—on occasion—his life. It was no wonder that yet another band of outlaws chose this very spot to ambush the stagecoach.

Satisfied that Billy hadn't missed anyone still lurking behind the boulders, Hawk turned his attention to the scene that lay spread out before him in the Pass. Sure enough, the coach was over on its side. The driver had unhitched the horses, who snuffled impatiently. One man nursed an arm wrapped with a makeshift blood-soaked bandage, while the driver and a couple of pasty-looking fellows who looked as if they couldn't lift a cat assessed what looked like a broken wheel.

And there, off to the side, stood a young woman in a dress the color of sage, holding a pistol aimed at a man who sat on a nearby rock with his hands tied behind his back.

Hawk and his men wasted no time in dismounting.

"I don't see any other ladies about." Garland clapped a hand on Hawk's back before joining a couple of the other men at the fallen stage.

"Need any help with that one?" Bartholomew Jackson, a grizzled Army veteran, nodded at the presumed outlaw.

Hawk shook his head. There wasn't much danger in a man tied up with a woman holding a gun on him. "Can you check the outskirts?"

With one last look at the young woman with the pistol, Jackson nodded before ambling off to see what might be found in the area around the stagecoach.

Hawk glanced back at the woman only to find her eyes were already on him. She looked him up and down, as if she were appraising what she saw. He couldn't help but wonder if he met her approval.

Of course, he didn't know for certain if this was Miss Groves. He didn't know how many other fair-haired young women were due to ride the stage from Pueblo. The man tied up next to her was somewhere near Hawk's age and looked resigned to his situation.

"Good afternoon, Miss," he said as he approached her. She narrowed a pair of arresting blue eyes at him. Her hair, gathered under an unpretentious hat, was so light in color that it was almost blinding. Combined with her smooth skin and heart-shaped face, it was quite a picture—one that made Hawk draw in a sudden breath.

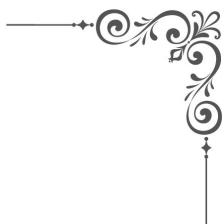
If she wasn't Miss Groves, he decided he'd be quite disappointed.

"Good afternoon," she said as if they were meeting at a social occasion instead of on the side of this narrow road while she held a pistol at one of the men who had robbed her stagecoach.

Too late, he remembered to remove his hat. "I'm Hawk Rodgers, Costilla County sheriff."

Something flickered across her face, too quick for him to catch it. But her mouth turned up at the corners, only a little but enough to set him more at ease. So, he didn't displease her entirely. That was something, he supposed.

"Sheriff Rodgers," she said, as if she were testing the feel of his name. "I believe you might be expecting me."



Chapter Three

“MISS GROVES?” THE SHERIFF said.

Lina nodded. Her heart thumped like some wild beast caged in her chest. She redoubled her grip on Papa’s revolver. It seemed to be the only thing keeping her grounded in this awkward moment. She didn’t know what she’d expected of Sheriff Rodgers. Most of her thoughts had centered on how she might convince him to tell her of her father’s last words. But one thing was for certain.

She hadn’t expected him to look like *this*.

Stop being foolish. She wasn’t here to trip and giggle like some love-sodden girl. Lina came on a mission, not to simper over the man’s imposing stature and deep brown eyes. She had no time for that.

Nor did she have time for idiots like the ones who held up the stage and caused it to tip over. Her own father might have built his treasure from robbing and stealing, but it was never from regular folks—only from companies he’d decided could stand to part with their money.

Whether that made it more right or not wasn’t something Lina wanted to think on for too long.

“I’m glad you’ve made it here safely,” the sheriff said. He paused a second, scrunching his forehead as if he just realized what he said. “Or, well, mostly safe.”

He motioned to one of his men, an older, grizzled fellow who looked as if he’d seen more than his share of trouble. They conferred a moment before the older man none-too-gently yanked the outlaw to his feet and led him away.

“You can put that pistol away now.” The sheriff nodded at Lina’s hand, and she realized she was still holding the gun. She returned it

to the pocket hidden in the folds of her skirt. When she looked up, it was to find Sheriff Rodgers watching her. She couldn't quite tell what he was thinking, but he looked somewhat bemused.

Lina pulled herself up straighter. She wasn't here for anyone's amusement, least of all this man who was to be her intended. "Would you like to hear what occurred?"

The sheriff replaced his hat, a beaten thing that looked as if it had once been a decent shade of brown. It covered the dark hair that hung just a bit too long, and yet somehow made him even more fascinating to look at.

Lina bit her lip and looked down, trying to compose herself. This was much easier done when her eyes weren't on him. "We rounded the bend over there, and that fellow and at least six other men—it was hard to count them in the melee—swooped down seemingly from nowhere." She went on to explain how the men's sudden appearance frightened the horses, causing them to rear up and the stage to tip over. The shotgun messenger must have jumped away and started shooting. They'd injured him, obviously, and once the driver raised his hands, the men pulled off a trunk that had been strapped to the rear of the stage.

Lina had stayed put inside the overturned coach with the other two passengers, trying to gather her wits. The situation had been unexpected and terrifying, but watching the two men she was with cower in fear gave her pause. Her father hadn't raised a helpless girl. It was why she'd thought not only to bring the pistols, but to place one of them on her person before boarding the train all the way back in east Kansas. So when one of the outlaws made comments about opening her own trunk, Lina drew on that strength, pulled out her own pistol, and aimed it through the window right at his leg.

"Did you hit him?" Sheriff Rodgers asked, quickly hiding the incredulous look that had shot across his face.

"Of course I did. My father taught me to shoot when I was young. I don't miss. Anyway, they'd apparently gotten what they came for, and with a passenger shooting at them, they scattered. Well, all except that man. He had the misfortune to catch his foot on one of the ropes that held the trunks. I held him here and the driver tied his hands."

Sheriff Rodgers pulled off his hat, ran a hand through his hair, and replaced it, as if he needed the moment to think on what to say.

“Well, Miss Groves, I’d say you handled yourself well. I’ll send a man to see if that man you injured might have left a trail of blood.” He paused. “You didn’t catch any names, did you?”

“No, I didn’t hear them speak a name,” she replied.

The sheriff nodded, his lips pressed together. And Lina wondered just how many outlaws roamed these mountains.

“Perhaps that fellow you captured will be loose-lipped,” he said.

“Hawk,” one of the sheriff’s men, a blond, ruddy-faced man closer to the sheriff’s age, called as he approached them. “There ain’t no fixing that wheel up here. It’s splintered pretty good. Probably needs a new one altogether.”

“All right.” Sheriff Rodgers rubbed a hand over his chin, which held a good day or two’s shadow of a beard. “Tell the passengers to get what they need, and we’ll ride down. Oh, and ask Jackson to look around the perimeter again for any sign of blood. Miss Groves here wounded one of the men with her pistol.”

The other man glanced at Lina with approval, his lips lifting into a smile, before hurrying off to do as Sheriff Rodgers asked.

Lina retrieved a few needed items from her trunk, for which the sheriff had kindly given her one of his saddlebags. She closed and locked the trunk, praying no one would abscond with it before a new wheel could be affixed to the stagecoach. Her clothing certainly wasn’t worth much, but it was all she had.

With the stage driver, the injured shotgun messenger, and the two passengers on one of each of the stage’s four horses, and the outlaw on his own horse, Lina found herself staring up at the sheriff’s horse and facing a long ride down the mountain—with him.

“Yes, I can ride,” she said in answer to the question that was clearly written across his face. She didn’t add that she’d never ridden two to a horse before, and certainly not with a man who made her heart beat far too quickly.

“Good. I didn’t want to presume.” He stood, holding the reins, apparently waiting for her to mount.

Lina’s cheeks grew warm as she regarded the distance between the ground and the stirrups. “I . . . I need something to . . .”

In a heartbeat, the sheriff had clasped his hands about her waist and lifted her up just far enough for her foot to reach the stirrup and her hand to grasp the saddle. Lina drew in a sharp breath, forcing herself to concentrate on the horse rather than the large

hands spanning her waist. For one of the few times in her life, she was grateful for the layers of fabric and stays preventing her from feeling anything more than the pressure of his touch.

And, as it turned out, navigating the mounting of a horse with petticoats and a dress required every ounce of her concentration. She'd just barely gotten herself situated behind the saddle with as much modesty as she could gather when Sheriff Rodgers eased himself onto the horse with the grace of a man who'd spent most of his life in the saddle.

Lina could hardly worry about how much of her stockinged legs were showing when he was this close to her. She stiffened, trying to create a space between them until he nudged the horse forward and she was forced to grab onto him or be shuffled right off the animal's rear end.

He chuckled as they ambled down the trail. "If I recall correctly, we are to be married. You may hold on as tightly as you need."

Lina's face flamed, and she was at least grateful he couldn't see her. His words did nothing to make her more willing to relax her arms—but a hard jolt as the horse navigated the steep road certainly did. She held on tightly after that, trying not to think about the warmth of his skin through his clothing or the way he smelled of leather and soap.

The ride down from the pass seemed to last forever, and by the time they arrived in town, Lina was stiff and aching from head to toe. It was nearly evening when Sheriff Rodgers helped her down from the horse.

She patted the animal, grateful for its assistance. "I never asked his name."

"Rabbit," Sheriff Rodgers said, handing the reins to what appeared to be the youngest of the men who'd ridden with them.

"That's an odd name for a horse." Lina bit her lip the second the words were out, hoping he didn't take them as an insult.

But he smiled as he tossed the saddlebag full of her things over his shoulder. "It is, until you see how fast he is."

Lina stepped back as he directed a couple of his men to bring the captured outlaw into his office, which Lina assumed also held the town's jail. She glanced about the town as she waited. Perseverance wasn't much to look at, but neither was Sweetwater, Kansas. She noted a boardinghouse, a mercantile, a diner, a livery stable, and at least three saloons from where they stood in front of

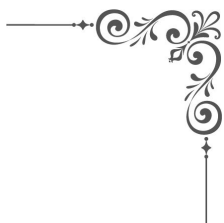
the sheriff's office. There was, notably, no church—at least not one she could see from here. Nor was there a schoolhouse.

She couldn't see the entire town from this perspective, Lina reassured herself. And yet, what did it matter? It wasn't as if she meant to settle here. She'd come in answer to Sheriff Rodgers' advertisement for one purpose only. And once she found Papa's hidden money, she'd return to Sweetwater and accompany Matthew to a city back East, where he'd finally receive the treatment he needed.

"I imagine you'd like to rest up some?" Sheriff Rodgers stepped in front of her, drawing Lina away from visions of her brother, happy and healthy again. He pulled off his hat and tapped it against his thigh. "I'm afraid the only boardinghouse we have in town isn't a place suitable for ladies." He paused a moment, and then held out an arm. "My home is affixed to the rear of the office. You can rest up there, and I'll stay in the office. Until . . . well . . ."

Lina looked down so he wouldn't see the blush she could feel covering her cheeks. She was acting utterly ridiculous, or so she told herself. He was a good-looking man, that was all, and it had sent her head into a whirlwind. But she was smart and she needed to remember her purpose here.

And so she forced herself to look up and give the man a smile as she took his proffered arm. "That would be fine. But might I see your offices first?"



Chapter Four

HAWK PAUSED, MISS GROVES' delicate hand resting on his arm. That wasn't a request he'd expected. In fact, he'd thought she would wish to rest and see the home in which she'd be living first.

But, then again, he also hadn't expected to find his bride-to-be holding an outlaw at gunpoint.

She gave him a dazzling smile, one that left him feeling somewhat lightheaded. Perhaps this was her way of showing support for his work. It was a nice thought, and he certainly appreciated that she wasn't a woman who scared easily in the face of the more dangerous aspects of living in a place like Perseverance.

"All right," he said, leading her to the door. He held it open, and she slipped through.

Inside, Garland and Billy Morrell, who'd ensured the fellow they'd picked up at the Pass was locked away in one of the cells that sat in the jail adjacent to the sheriff's office, stood near the desk, discussing the day's events. The other men who'd ridden with him had already headed home for the evening.

"I don't believe I had the pleasure of meeting your colleagues," Miss Groves said, coming to stand by the corner of his desk, her hands clasped demurely in front of her. If he didn't know better, Hawk would've assumed she was a delicate flower, likely to faint at the merest mention of anything lawless.

She was quite fascinating, and he found himself wishing Garland and Billy would scatter, leaving him the space to get to know her better.

Instead, he plowed forward with introductions, and Miss Groves inclined her head and said polite words of greeting to both his regular deputy and to Billy, who stood with his mouth half-open as

if he'd never seen a woman before. And well, he hadn't likely seen many, at least not near his own age, as Lina was. Perseverance was few and far between with members of the fairer sex.

Garland elbowed Billy hard, and Miss Groves covered a smile with her gloved hand.

"We locked up that fellow," Garland said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the door that led to the jail. "Said his name was Pete Turley. It ain't familiar to me. I'll see if I can't get more out of him tomorrow."

Hawk ran the name through his memory, coming up with nothing. "All right. Maybe he'll be more talkative then."

"Want us to stick around? To help?" Billy asked, his gaze flickering to Miss Groves.

Hawk bit back a laugh. The boy was clearly taken with Miss Groves.

"Fairly sure Rodgers has this situation under control." Garland gave Billy a slight shove toward the door. "See you in the morning. Good evening, Miss Groves." He tugged on his hat.

With that, they were gone, and Hawk was alone with Miss Groves. She stood, looking about the place, and he suddenly wished he'd run a rag over the desk and the other sparse pieces of furniture, or at least swept up the floor, which looked as if half the dust stirred up in the street outside had found its way in.

"I take it that's your jail?" Miss Groves nodded toward the door in the rear.

"It is. And this is my office. There isn't much to it, I'm afraid."

"Well, it seems a good place to conduct the business of keeping the town in order." Miss Groves walked slowly across the dusty floorboards, letting her fingers trail across the door of the old wardrobe that held an extra coat, some old files, and various sundries that prisoners had upon their persons when they arrived.

"The county," he corrected her. "Not that there's much out here save for Perseverance and Mad Dog Gulch. Fort Garland keeps its own peace."

"Mad Dog Gulch?" She raised her eyebrows at the curious name.

"It sounds just as bad as it is. Not much of a place for visiting, particularly for ladies." An unfortunate side effect of cleaning up Perseverance was the flood of ne'er-do-wells into the next nearest town—and up into the mountains.

"Have no fear, I don't believe I'll wish to pay it a visit." She

smiled at him, and Hawk instinctively smiled back. "Perseverance seems like a decent town, though."

"It is now. Some day I'll tell you how much work went into making it that way. It isn't perfect, and we still don't have much in the way of polite entertainments or many ladies for you to befriend, but I'm hopeful that will come now that it's become a safer place to lay one's head."

"I'm certain it will. And I'm happy to be a part of that."

Her optimism lifted his heart. "To be honest, I feared your introduction to Perseverance might put you off staying here."

She twisted her hands together, and for a second, he feared he'd stirred up emotions within her that might change her mind. Even the bravest souls felt fear.

But she held fast to her pleasant expression, and said, "Well, now I suppose I have something fascinating about which to write my brother and friends back in Kansas." She took a step toward him, her light blue eyes so trusting that Hawk's breath caught in his throat. Had he been mad to send for a bride? What sort of man brought a woman all this way, only for her to need to face down outlaws before she'd even reached town?

But Miss Groves hadn't said a word about fear or wanting to go home. Instead, she looked up at him and said, "Would it be all right if I saw the house now?"

Relief spread through him like a runaway train. Although he knew she wasn't easily cowed, he'd still feared she might come to her senses. "Of course." He gestured to a second door in the rear of the building, one almost hidden behind the stove that warmed the building in winter.

The house was mere feet behind the office and jail. "It isn't much, I'm afraid," Hawk said as he opened the door. "But I hope you'll find it suitable." He had at least bothered to make an effort to clean the house. He led Miss Groves through the small parlor to the kitchen directly behind it. In between the two rooms, a narrow staircase led to the single bedroom upstairs. He set the saddlebag full of her things on the kitchen table.

"Well, I think it's just perfect," Miss Groves said.

"If you find you want for anything, please feel free to place an order on my account at the mercantile." He set a hand on the top of one of the kitchen chairs as he tried to ignore the awkwardness of all of this. Would it get easier? It had to . . . he hoped. Once they

grew to know each other better. Once they were married.

And that was another awkward subject to broach.

"Miss Groves, I . . ." Hawk cleared his throat. He forced himself to look her in the eyes, despite the raging desire he had to look *anywhere* else. "There is a minister newly arrived in town, hoping to set up a congregation here. I took the liberty of speaking with him soon after he arrived, and he agreed to . . . well, to marry us. As soon as you're ready, of course," he added quickly, lest her eyes go any wider and she scamper off like a rabbit at a gunshot.

She swallowed visibly. "That sounds . . . I am glad to hear there is a minister."

It was a noncommittal response, and Hawk swallowed his disappointment. But what did he expect? For her to jump immediately into marriage with a man she'd only just met? They'd only exchanged a couple of letters each, after all. All he knew about her were the basic facts of her life in Kansas, and she knew only the same of him.

"I will, of course, let you stay in the house. I'll sleep in my office," he said again, pushing the disappointment away.

"But where will you sleep in there?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I suppose if I get desperate, I can join Mr. Turley in a cell." He said it half-joking, but Miss Groves looked utterly appalled.

"There is a perfectly good settee in the parlor," she said. "I don't see why you couldn't stay there."

He was about to say something about propriety and her reputation, but to be honest, the thought of spending nights on the settee instead of the floor in his office sounded much more comfortable. "If that would suit you, Miss Groves," he said.

"It would, please. I couldn't bear to think of you living in the jail. And please, call me Lina. If I'm to be your wife, what should I call you?"

Ly-nuh, he repeated in his head. When she'd signed her letters with the nickname, he'd thought it pronounced differently. "Most call me Hawk," he said. Not a soul aside from his own mother had ever called him Henry.

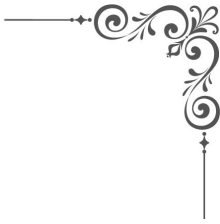
"Very well, then, Hawk. One day, you'll have to tell me how you came by that name." She gazed at him expectantly.

"It isn't much of a story, I promise," he said, more pleased at the fact that she spoke of the future than anything else. "I'll leave you

to rest up from the road. I have some work to finish before I call it an evening.”

And with a tilt of his hat, he left her in the kitchen, feeling more optimistic about life than he had in a very long time.

For all of his professional accomplishments, nothing made him feel lighter in step than Miss Groves’—Lina’s—smile and wide blue eyes, looking only at him with all the hope in the world.



Chapter Five

LINA HAD PREPARED A simple meal of salted ham, sliced tomatoes, and cheese, all of which she'd found tucked away in the sheriff's pantry. When he didn't return by seven o'clock, she wrapped up his supper and carried it over to the office, where he met her with a surprised grin and a plethora of thanks.

Hawk Rodgers, she'd decided, was mighty hard not to like.

Now, returning from delivering Hawk's dinner to him at his office, Lina pondered what to do with herself. She'd already unpacked the necessities she'd brought down from the mountains. Laying out her hairbrush and tooth powder on an unfamiliar washstand in someone else's house felt so awkward. She had only the clothes she wore with her, and as meager as her belongings were, she hoped her trunk would remain undisturbed until it could be brought down with the stage tomorrow.

It remained light outside, although the sun was quite low in the western sky. She'd already made herself familiar with the house, thought about what she might prepare for breakfast in the morning, and fretted over how Matthew was faring with the Bauers back home. She would write a letter tomorrow, she decided, letting them know she'd arrived safely and asking for news of her brother's well-being.

In the meantime, this was the perfect opportunity to search the house for information about her father. The thought of asking Hawk about his conversation with Papa felt almost impossible right now. Lina didn't know what she expected to find as she opened drawers and looked under the settee. Some of his personal effects, perhaps. Surely he'd had something on him when he passed. What would have happened to those items? If he'd left any letter or other

missive to her and Matthew, it had likely been read by prying eyes.

Lina stopped still in her search of the small pantry adjacent to the kitchen. If Papa *had* written her a letter, he would have addressed it to “Carolina.” Hawk would have recognized her name immediately. Yet, he didn’t appear as if he had. And he wouldn’t have sent for her to marry him if he knew who she was.

Letting out a shuddering breath, Lina sagged against the pantry door, thankful he didn’t know who she was . . . And yet disappointed that this likely meant there was no letter from her father on his person when he’d died.

Still, he might have left *something*. Anything that might serve as a clue to the treasure’s whereabouts. If such a thing existed, perhaps it was in Hawk’s office. In that wardrobe or one of the desk drawers. And yet, she needed to finish this thorough search of the house, just in case.

But thirty minutes later, Lina found herself no more the knowledgeable about where Papa had hidden his money. Sitting on the bed, the days of bone-shattering travel caught up with her. And so she extinguished the lamp and laid down, fully dressed, and was fast asleep in minutes.



IT WAS LATE THE NEXT morning when Lina awoke. She sat up, disoriented for a moment before she remembered where she was. She washed up as best she could, hoping today she might be able to change out of the dress she’d been traveling in for so long.

Movement in the kitchen reached her ears as she descended the stairs, and when she emerged into the kitchen, Hawk greeted her from the stove where eggs sizzled away in a pan. Lina stood at the bottom of the steps, blinking at the unexpected sight of a man cooking his own breakfast. Even when he had his good spells, she doubted Matthew could do more than slice and butter bread.

“Good morning,” she finally said in response.

“You’ll be happy to hear that I’ve got a couple of men going back up to the Pass with the stage driver and one sturdy, intact wheel. You’ll have your trunk back in your possession by this afternoon, at the latest.” He slid eggs from the pan easily onto plates, as if this was something he’d done a hundred times.

“That’s good to hear.” Feeling as if she ought to do *something*, Lina moved toward the table. But Hawk had already laid out mugs

of steaming coffee, bread, butter, and even a small jar of what looked like blackberry preserves.

"I hope you like your eggs fried. That's about the only way I can make them." Hawk handed her a plate, and Lina stared down at the perfectly cooked pair of eggs.

"Fried is just fine. Thank you."

His lips curved up as he sat across from her. "You look surprised."

She'd hoped he wouldn't notice that. "Well, I suppose I've not met a man so . . . capable in the kitchen."

He slid the jar of preserves and a knife across the table to her. Lina took it gratefully and layered the sweet-smelling jam over the butter on her bread. "I decided some time ago that it was pointless to subsist on beans and cornbread when I could learn to do otherwise," he said.

"Then I must apologize for the simple meal I made last evening."

"No need. It was filling and all the better because I didn't have to put it together myself." His genuine compliment set Lina at ease again. So much so that she could almost forget the reason she was here.

His eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, she noticed as they ate and he told her of his mishaps in the kitchen. He was so kind, hardworking, and devastatingly handsome. How had he not found a wife before now?

"Lina?" he prompted, and she realized she'd let her mind go wandering. It was those eyes, she decided. They were so dark, they nearly swallowed his pupils. Looking into them was mesmerizing, as if she'd fallen into him, body and soul.

"I'm sorry, what did you ask me?"

"My food is that good, hmm?" he teased, and it warmed her cheeks, knowing that it certainly wasn't his food she'd been lost in. "I was saying that Reverend Schilling came by early this morning to let me know he was being called up to Denver to meet another preacher who'd hoped to settle down this way but met with an illness on the journey west. He expects to be gone at least a few weeks, if not longer."

Lina's heart seemed to trip over itself at Hawk's words. He hadn't insisted on an immediate wedding, and yet she couldn't stay here for weeks, living in his home, unmarried. Which meant . . .

"I don't want to push you into anything, but, well . . ." Hawk

straightened his shoulders, and something about his obvious discomfort in asking if she'd marry him now set Lina more at ease.

She set her fork down, taking her time and hoping that it might draw the color back from her cheeks. "I presume Perseverance has no judge or other qualified person?"

"You presume correctly." Hawk still sat up stiffly, as if he expected her to politely turn him down.

Which every sensible part of her brain yelled at her to do. And yet, she'd come out here with the specific purpose of marrying Sheriff Hawk Rodgers—no matter her motivation at agreeing to do so.

Did it matter if it was today or a week from now? And while she knew a man could hide the monster that lived inside until it was too late, she had the distinct and unwavering feeling that Hawk had already shown her his true self. He was the one who'd taken the time to talk with Papa—instead of shooting him. That curious fact was one she'd wondered on more than once on the journey out here, and even more since she'd arrived.

"I will marry you," she said softly.

It seemed to take a moment before her words sunk in. When they did, a broad smile lit Hawk's face, his dark eyes seeming to brighten a shade. "All right. I'll notify the preacher, then."

Lina spent the little time remaining of the morning hours hoping her trunk might arrive quickly from the Pass, else she'd wind up wearing her wrinkled and dust-stained green skirt and bodice. Her prayers were answered just after one o'clock in the afternoon, when Deputy Garland and Mr. Morrell arrived with her trunk in tow. She thanked them profusely, and as soon as they left, she dug through the items of clothing inside.

She didn't have much to choose from, but a soft rose-colored skirt with a matching bodice and overskirt seemed to fit the occasion. It was the nicest dress she owned, although at this point it was several years old. Lina smoothed out the wrinkles as best she could, pulled her unruly hair into a neat chignon, and then sat for a moment, looking at her reflection in the glass she'd set behind the washbasin.

She looked no different. She'd worn this dress to church services a hundred times, and her hair was arranged the same as usual. But yet she was about to become someone's wife. A man who'd been nothing but kind to her.

Guilt crept in at her motivation for accepting Hawk's offer. What would he say if he knew? Would he turn on her in disgust, not only at her reason for coming here, but for the simple fact of who her father was?

Would he marry the daughter of an outlaw? Or would those smiles that made her fingers tingle turn to an angry frown?

Lina pressed a hand against her stomach and closed her eyes. She couldn't let herself go down that road. Matthew desperately needed treatment, and she would do *anything* to help him. Even marry a man under false pretenses.

Matthew . . . Not knowing how he fared back at home cut through her like a knife. She'd been responsible for him for so long, ever since the first convulsions had appeared nearly eight years ago, after Matthew had taken a bad fall from a horse and hit his head. Not being there for him now, knowing he missed her . . . The aching sadness that came from those thoughts dug its claws into her heart and refused to let go.

Lina clenched her hands, willing the waves of sadness to disappear. When they did, the worry about deceiving Hawk filled its place. If—no, *when*—she found her father's money and got Matthew set up somewhere back East with a physician who truly understood his condition, then she'd figure out what was next. There would be no hiding the truth of the matter from Hawk then.

Lina forced herself to take deep breaths as she dispelled that thought from her mind. When she opened her eyes, she steeled a look at her reflection again. There was no use worrying over what was to come. Only two things should be on her mind right now: her wedding and finding Papa's money.

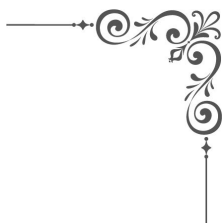
A soft knock came on the door, followed by Hawk's voice. "Lina, are you ready?"

Another deep breath to steady her nerves, and Lina opened the door with a smile—which was impossible to keep from her face when she saw him, dressed in a hardly-worn black suit with a string tie, polished boots, and a hat that appeared to be just purchased.

Hawk cut a fine figure, and she eagerly took his offered arm. Never in all the time she'd been caring for Matthew and taking in laundry and keeping house the past few years had she given more than a passing thought to marriage, and then only to assume it would never happen for her. After all, she was a girl with no money, no parents at home, and a brother who needed someone

nearby at all times.

And yet, that girl *was* marrying. As they waited for the preacher with a few of Hawk's men in attendance, Lina cast away all her worries and that nagging guilt, and simply let herself revel in the fact that she, Carolina Groves, was marrying a man more handsome and kind than she ever could have dreamed up.



Chapter Six

THE CEREMONY WAS SOMEHOW both too quick and too slow, and afterward, Hawk found himself alone in his house with Lina. Garland had insisted he could keep watch over the office, and even possibly extract some more information from Pete Turley about the stage robbery. When Hawk protested, the other men backed Garland up, and off they'd gone, leaving him here.

In truth, it wasn't that he yearned to go back to work—it was that expectant look on his new wife's face that made spending time with her far more terrifying than trying to get Turley to talk or, in fact, facing down an entire gang of men bent on destruction.

He'd excused himself to change out of the suit into something he felt he could breathe in, and when he returned, he found Lina in the kitchen, stirring a pot of something that smelled like potato soup with an apron tied around the pretty pink dress she'd worn to their ceremony.

"I'm absolutely starving," she said when she saw him.

Hawk hadn't given much thought to his stomach, but now that the scent of potatoes and ham filled the air, it growled in response. He busied himself with retrieving what was left of yesterday's bread, and by the time they sat to eat, it felt almost normal. Lina's instinct to make food was a good one. It was much easier to grow used to their new status as husband and wife over a meal than sitting awkwardly together in the parlor.

The soup tasted better than anything Hawk had eaten in months. It seemed he couldn't shovel it into his mouth fast enough. As he fished the last hunk of his bread around the bowl to gather every last bit of the soup, he found Lina watching him. Hawk paused, bread halfway between the bowl and his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've eaten alone for so long I haven't had cause to think much on politeness when it comes to food."

She gave him a smile—one that seemed almost wistful. "It isn't that. I'm glad you're enjoying it. I was marveling at how you use the bread. My brother does the exact same when we have soup."

Hawk chewed the last bit of bread and thought on what she said. She'd written that she lived with her brother, who was only a couple of years younger than she was. If Lina was twenty, that would make her brother about eighteen years of age. "I'm sure you miss him."

Lina swallowed, letting her spoon still in her bowl. She looked down, and Hawk had a hunch it was to keep him from seeing exactly how much she missed her home and her brother. "I do," she finally said in a quiet voice. "Matthew . . . he depended on me."

"I'm certain he did." Hawk pushed his bowl to the side, and studied the concern on Lina's face as she looked up at him. "It's good for a man to have to do for himself, though."

"Matthew is different." She swallowed again, the remainder of her soup forgotten. "When we were children, he took a bad fall from a horse. We don't know exactly how it happened, but he hit his head. And ever since then . . ." She squeezed her eyes shut, and Hawk couldn't tell if it was from the memory or from simply missing her brother.

He instinctively reached for her hand, which rested on the table next to her bowl. Her eyes flew open as his palm curled around the back of her hand. Her fingers stiffened, but then as she looked down to where his hand rested on hers, the muscles relaxed. Hawk had the distinct feeling that no one had comforted Lina in a very long time.

"He has convulsions. They come regularly enough that I never dared leave him alone for too long. There was no telling when one might happen. Sometimes while he sleeps, but other times while working or simply standing near the stove or too close to something else that could injure him if he falls. Our papa refused to see him placed in an asylum, as more than one doctor recommended. And I agreed."

Hawk's attention went from the feel of Lina's small fingers beneath his to the worry underpinning her words. "Where is he now?"

"Staying with some neighbors who are dear friends. They have

multiple children, all of whom adore Matthew. I know he's well looked after, and yet . . ."

Hawk let out a breath. Her worry over her brother was palpable. And it triggered emotions inside of him that he hadn't thought on for some time, of the way he'd felt after leaving home. "Would you like to send for him?" The words were out of his mouth before he had thoroughly considered them, but as the offer lingered in the air between them, Hawk knew it was the right decision.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open just a little. "You would do that for me?"

He squeezed her hand. "Of course. He's your family, and your family is now my family."

Lina's eyes grew watery, and she blinked quickly as she looked away. "That is very kind, and something I wish were possible. But I fear Matthew cannot travel all this way on his own." She extracted her hand from beneath his and stood, taking his bowl and carrying it to the pot on the stove. "He's in good hands, and I must be brave without him."

She set a full bowl of soup in front of him and smiled. "But I thank you for your generosity. It was hard to leave him after it having been only the two of us for so long. Have you any siblings?"

He'd written to her of his parents—his mother still in Texas and his father long ago deceased—but, he realized with her question, he'd not mentioned any other of his family. "I have two older sisters and a younger brother. They've all remained near home, and I'm afraid I haven't seen any of them in years."

"I'm so sorry," Lina replied, stirring what remained of her soup.

"It was difficult at first, but I've grown used to it now. Although I've never stopped missing them." He hoped it was the right thing to say. It was the truth, after all, and he thoroughly understood her feeling somewhat bereft without her brother nearby.

Lina gave him a soft smile. "I suppose it does become easier with the passage of time."

Hawk spoke more on his siblings' families—the nieces and nephews he'd never met—before finishing his meal and excusing himself to check in on Garland at the office.

Garland and Jackson eyed him as if he'd lost his mind when he arrived, and after assuring him that Turley had offered up no additional information about the men he'd been riding with—only that he'd mentioned he used to ride with the outlaw Joseph

Grayson—they essentially pushed Hawk back out the door.

He took half of an hour to walk about the town to reassure himself that all was well, particularly after yesterday's stagecoach robbery. When all seemed in order, he returned home as the sun began its descent in the west. He found Lina sitting comfortably in the parlor, some sort of mending piled upon her lap.

"Is all well in Perseverance?" She looked up at him with a welcoming smile, her sewing paused on her lap.

"It is." Hawk settled himself on the settee, the place that had served as a bed to him the night before. He wondered briefly if it would again tonight.

That question was answered soon enough, when after making some inconsequential conversation about weather and the oncoming arrival of autumn, Lina replaced her sewing into a small bag and stood.

"If it's all the same to you," she said as Hawk rose also. "I believe I will go on to sleep." She paused by the stairs.

"It has been a long, exciting day," he replied, standing nearby and clasping his hands behind him. Half of him wanted to ask her thoughts on this awkward situation, but the other half squelched that urge. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her or make her feel as if he had pushed her into something that made her uncomfortable.

She glanced to her left, toward the stairs, and when she looked back to him, her uncertainty was evident in the pinch of her lips. "I . . . I don't know how to say this, but perhaps you wouldn't mind . . ."

A wave of disappointment that Hawk hadn't expected rushed through him. But he stood straight, dropped his hands to his sides, and nodded. "Of course. I will sleep here for now, if you prefer."

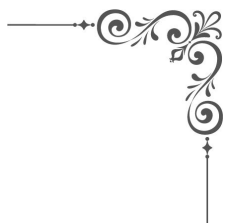
Her face flushed pink, but she gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you." She took a step back, as if he might change his mind. "Thank you for everything."

"Good evening, Lina," he said, not entirely trusting himself to move from his rigid stance.

She glanced back at him from halfway up the steps, and Hawk was certain he would dream of that smile all night. He didn't know what he thought marriage would be like, but he never imagined feeling anything like this. He wanted to do anything to make her smile. If she asked, Hawk would run through fire for the pale

beauty who was sleeping in his bed upstairs.

He ran a hand over his face, trying to push the thoughts from his mind. He needed to get his head on straight before returning to work tomorrow.



Chapter Seven

IN BETWEEN BITS OF cleaning and cooking and a trip to the mercantile, Lina found her thoughts wandering. And not to worries about Matthew or how she might find Papa's missing money—but to Hawk.

She burned her finger on a hot pan as she replayed his considerate offer to continue to sleep downstairs through her mind. She swept the same patch of the parlor three times as she remembered his hand covering hers, warm and with just the right amount of strength to make her feel as if nothing in the world could ever harm her. And then she was three buildings past Hawk's office with her purchases from the mercantile as she thought of his unexpected offer to have Matthew live with them here.

When writing to Hawk and planning to come to Perseverance, Lina hadn't given much thought at all to the man himself. She knew she'd have to marry him, and she was prepared for that, but she hadn't expected . . . well, *Hawk*.

As she unpacked food and a few kitchen items Hawk didn't already have, Lina thought on this man she'd married. She'd imagined him as a shadowy sort of figure, she supposed, not necessarily having much of a personality beyond that of a stoic lawman, sworn to his duty. Perhaps she'd expected him to be as cold and tough as he likely had to be with the men he needed to keep in line.

She certainly hadn't imagined she might feel anything toward him at all. Particularly when it was one of his men who'd ended her father's life.

And yet she did.

Lina paused, new pie plate in hand, as that realization slammed

into her like a bullet meeting its target. She slowly set the pie plate on a shelf and then turned, letting herself lean against the small table that served as a countertop. Her heart seemed to beat out of her chest, and she pressed a hand against it, willing it to slow and willing her mind to untangle the confusing thoughts that ran through it.

Why did Hawk have to be so kind? *Of course he is*, she berated herself. He was the one who wanted a wife. He certainly wouldn't do that and then act cruelly toward her. It was Lina who needed to pull herself together and remember why she was here.

Later on, she could figure out what to do about the twinge in her stomach she felt whenever Hawk looked at her or how she couldn't get the feel of his hand covering hers out of her mind.

And so that night, while Hawk visited the privy behind the house, Lina snuck downstairs, retrieved Hawk's keys from where they thankfully sat on the end table in the parlor, and slipped out the front door. She'd return by the back door, she decided, silently and long after Hawk had fallen asleep.

The night was clear and cool, with stars winking above. Lina smiled as she admired them filling the sky from the western horizon all the way to the tips of the mountains to the east. Matthew had always loved the stars too. They'd spent many an evening together picking out the constellations that Papa had shown them years ago and hoping that he was well, wherever he was.

The memory was bittersweet now that Papa was gone and Lina was so far from home. She tucked it away and focused her attention on the building in front of her as a nightbird of some kind struck up a lonesome song. She moved quickly around the office and jail, just in case Hawk was struck with some desire to come around the front of the house. Or, even worse, he discovered his keys missing and came searching the office for them.

The street was mostly empty, save for music and laughter coming from the saloons that sat farther down the road. Perseverance was such an odd town, Lina thought as she studied the front of the office. How such quiet and such raucous noise could co-exist peacefully, she couldn't quite put together in her mind. Back home, Sweetwater had one saloon, and it closed nightly before midnight. Here, the saloons seemed to be open the whole night through, and while they got rowdy, Hawk said that for the most part, he and his men didn't need to intervene.

It was testament to his hard work, Lina supposed. He'd mentioned in passing how lawless Perseverance had once been. She ought to ask him more about it to satisfy her own curiosity. He'd likely enjoy telling the story, and Lina smiled at the thought of Hawk regaling her with something about which he was proud.

What was she *doing*? Lina shook her head in an attempt to clear it. Here she was, standing like a daydreaming fool in the dead of night outside the darkened sheriff's office, not giving a single thought to why she was here or whether she might be caught in the act.

Keep your wits about you, Carolina Groves, she thought. A momentary recollection that Groves was no longer her last name flitted through her mind, but she forced it aside, focusing instead on trying a key in the door's lock. She'd chosen correctly, and the door opened with a gentle *click*.

Lina slipped inside, where it was even darker given there was no moon or starlight to illuminate the single large room. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust, but even as they did, she knew there was no way she could examine the contents of drawers or that large wardrobe without any sort of light.

A lamp and matches sat on a table beside the door. That was all well and good, except someone could easily see the light coming from the windows. Someone like Deputy Garland or any one of Hawk's other men who might be out and about. Or even Hawk himself, if he couldn't sleep. But if she could cover the windows . . .

The solution was simple enough, and Lina almost laughed at herself when she discovered both windows were covered with crudely-made curtains. It made sense, she supposed, as she ensured each set was drawn tightly across the glass. If someone had ill designs on the sheriff and his men, it was no use allowing them to easily look into the windows.

The glass sufficiently covered, Lina struck a match and lit the lamp. Lifting it, she glanced around the room. It looked much the same as it had when she'd first seen it. The desk and chairs, the misplaced wardrobe, the squat little stove in the corner in front of the rear door, and the door that led to the jail—where Pete Turley currently resided.

Where to begin? Lina chewed her lip for a few seconds as she assessed the room. The desk seemed to be the best option. She said a quick prayer that she would find something. Perhaps Papa's

personal effects, notes about the day her father died, some indication of where Papa had been before he and his men had been cornered, or, as unlikely as it seemed, a written account of what he'd told Hawk.

She set the lamp atop the desk and pulled at one of the drawers. To her everlasting relief, it was unlocked. The drawer held a stack of papers—a map of the area, some purchase receipts, and wanted posters, both new and old. Lina paused at the image of her father's likeness. The artist hadn't captured him exactly, but the eyes were perfect. She ran a finger lightly over the crinkles at the corners, seeing the startling blue of his eyes—the same as hers—staring back at her from the simple ink drawing. *I saved it up for you, Lina-girl. For you and Matthew*, she could almost hear him say.

"But where?" she asked under her breath.

She replaced the posters and other sheets back into the drawer, closed it, and began rifling through another, which contained various odds and ends—keys, an extra pair of pistols, ammunition. She shut the drawer. The desk had yielded no useful information.

Lina lifted her lamp and made for the wardrobe next. It was the only other possible place in this room that could contain paperwork. She swung the door open and cringed as it creaked. But if Mr. Turley in his cell heard it beyond the closed door, he didn't think enough of it to call out.

The wardrobe held all sorts of things—a couple of coats, a clean shirt, a knitted scarf, some dirty gloves. There were a couple of full canvas sacks holding more pistols and ammunition, a couple of bills and some coins, and various other items that looked as if they'd come from a man's pockets. Some of this likely belonged to Turley, Lina realized as she glanced through the second of the two sacks. But none of it appeared to have come from Papa.

She pushed the sacks aside and found a stack of papers. Raising the lamp higher, she flipped through them where they sat on the floor of the wardrobe. There were some old letters, dated far earlier than Lina was interested. A couple of telegrams that looked as if they'd come through some other town with a railroad and telegraph lines. Some more purchase receipts. Another short letter, this one dated—Lina squinted in the shadowy light to see the handwriting.

This one was dated October the first of 1871. It was a mere three weeks before the newspaper had reported on the death Lina's father.

She pulled the letter out of the wardrobe and drew the lamp closer to make out more of the words. It was addressed to Hawk and consisted of only two short paragraphs. The very first sentence mentioned her father by name. Lina shivered, though the room was far from cold. Was this what she'd been searching for?

Note the possibility of Joseph Grayson & men in Sangre de Cristos & San Luis Valley area. Wanted for multiple robberies of Colo. & N.M. RR, overland stage, &etc. Last—

"Get on home, Butler, lest I feel the need to put you up in a cell for the night." Deputy Garland's voice came from what felt like was right over Lina's shoulder.

She jerked her head so fast, her neck pinched. He wasn't in the office, of course, but he had to be immediately outside. Lina glanced at the letter, her hand trembling so much it was hard to make out the words. She skimmed the remainder as fast as possible, her eyes catching the words, *Last seen in Mad Dog Gulch*, before extinguishing the lamp, shoving the paper back into the wardrobe and quickly shutting the door. The creak this time seemed to reverberate through the room, or so Lina thought.

Hawk's keys. Where had she left them? The desk. There was no time to return the lamp to the front of the room. She left it on the desk and ran her hand over the wood until she found Hawk's keys. Just at that moment, the sound of another key turning into the lock at the front door rushed at her ears. Had she locked it? Lina prayed she had, or it wouldn't take long for Deputy Garland to discover something was amiss.

Keys in her hand, Lina bolted across the room. She couldn't leave by the rear door, or she'd risk Hawk seeing her from the house. With the deputy about to step through the front door at any moment, that left one possibility—the jail.

Praying to the Almighty Lord as she never had before, even as she'd journeyed west on the stage to meet an unknown groom, Lina tried one of Hawk's keys into the door. It didn't fit. The jiggle of the key in the lock up front had silenced. Deputy Garland would open that door at any moment, and here she'd be, caught like a fox in a henhouse with a stolen key in the lock to town's jail.

What would Deputy Garland think then? What would Hawk think?

A healthy dose of shame flooded the fear that coursed through Lina's veins as she fit another key into the lock with shaky fingers.

The door clicked open, and she slid through just as the front door opened. She forced herself to shut the door slowly even as Mr. Turley called out, "Hello there?" in a sleepy voice from his cell.

Lina covered the gasp that emerged from her mouth just as the deputy called out, "Just Garland. You need anything, Turley?"

Lina slid silently down the line of cells in the pitch blackness of the room. The bars beneath her fingers were her only guideposts.

"Nah, lest you gonna get me out of here," the man called back to Deputy Garland.

Lina could hear the deputy's laugh in response as the line of bars ended. Had she reached the end of the room? Her heel silently stuck something behind her as she felt her way around the bars to where they ended. This must be the rear of the room. Hands moving from bar to bar down the side of the last cell, she finally reached the wall. She'd wait here until the deputy left. If he felt the need to enter this room, she could duck down and crouch against the wall, hopefully hidden in the shadows far from any light the lamp might cast.

She stood perfectly still now, forcing herself to breath evenly and slowly as she listened to Turley settle himself down and the deputy move about the office beyond the door. She hoped she hadn't left anything too out of place in her rush to escape the office.

A quiet *click* sounded from nearby, and Lina stifled a gasp. Perhaps there was another prisoner in here besides Turley. She let go of the bars and stepped backward along the side wall, feeling behind her for the wall at the rear of the building. Instead, her hands found more bars.

That was odd. Lina stepped forward again, paying extra careful attention to her direction. There were the bars in front of her.

A sense of dread crept through her bones. Quietly and carefully, she stepped to the right, back toward the direction from where she'd come. Her outstretched hand met more bars.

No. This couldn't be what she feared it might be. Lina turned and followed those bars toward the rear of the building again. Her hands brushed over something smooth set into the bars. Lina continued in the same direction.

More bars.

Frantic now, she paced the length of them toward the side wall, then around again until she reached the smooth area in the bars. She reached around through the space between the smooth area

and the bar beside it. It was a lock. There was denying the truth of the matter now.

Lina had locked herself into a jail cell.

She bit back the metallic taste of fear. She had Hawk's keys. All she had to do was find the right one and let herself out. That couldn't be too difficult.

She pulled out the keys as quietly as possible, muffling their clinking together with her free hand. Then, one by one, she reached through the bars and tried them each in the lock.

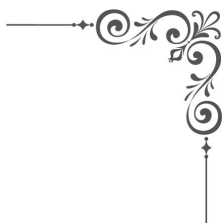
Not a single one worked.

Biting back the urge to scream or cry, Lina tried each key again. And again, not a single one would turn the lock.

She stepped backward until she hit the side wall, and then slid down to the floor. Frustrated tears pricked at her eyes. Those keys in the desk—those must be the keys to the cells.

She'd locked herself into jail, and there was no getting out. Not until the deputy or Hawk found her.

How could she possibly explain this?



Chapter Eight

WHEN HAWK AROSE THE next morning, Lina was still abed. Persuading her to cook up a breakfast for the man who'd helped rob the stagecoach she'd arrived in wasn't anything he'd looked forward to anyway. Turley could make do with bread and cheese again.

He grabbed the food and returned for his hat and keys—only to discover an empty table where his keys had been.

Hawk glanced down at the floor and then behind the settee. That was odd. Had he left them in the office? It wasn't like him, but then again, yesterday hadn't been ordinary. Feeling quite the fool, he slid out the door and hoped Garland had already arrived. Else he'd be standing outside with no way in.

Hawk arrived just as Garland entered. It was good timing, and Hawk was thankful that he needn't explain his mishap to Garland. Except . . . as he hung his hat and glanced about the room, there was no sign of his ring of keys.

"Everything all right?" Garland paused by the desk.

Hawk ran a hand through his hair. Had he set them elsewhere at home? He hadn't thought to look beyond the parlor. "It appears I've misplaced my keys," he finally confessed.

Just as he thought, a knowing grin lit up Garland's face. "Can't imagine how that happened."

Hawk shook his head. He had to have set them down in the kitchen. "I'll give Turley his breakfast and check again at home. Could you . . . ?"

Still grinning in a way that made Hawk want to smack him up the back of the head, Garland retrieved his own keys from his pocket and opened the door to the jail. Hawk muttered his thanks as Garland began to laugh. Turley's company would be preferable

to that of his deputy right now, Hawk thought as he entered the jail.

“Turley! I’ve got your—” Hawk stopped still just outside Turley’s cell, his eyes drawn to a huddled-up figure in the far cell. But there was something odd about the person Garland must have locked up last night . . .

“Garland?” he called as he shoved the wrapped-up bread and cheese through the bars to Turley, who took it with an amused smile. “Garland!”

“I’m right here,” the man said from the door.

Hawk stepped toward the last cell. There was no doubt at all now—the person occupying the last cell was a woman. He could tell from the voluminous skirts puddled around her. “You arrest a woman last night?”

“Did I arrest . . .” Garland repeated the words as if they were a language he didn’t understand. “No.”

“Then—” The words lodged in his throat when the woman raised her head. Hair the color of cornsilk fell in wisps about her face, and those eyes . . . “Lina?”

Garland retreated back into the office, and before Lina had risen from where she’d been huddled on the floor, he’d returned, the cell key in the lock before Hawk could piece two thoughts together.

Lina stepped silently from the cell. Without a word, she held out Hawk’s keys. He stared at them in her hand before finally taking them and sliding them into a pocket. He had so many questions he couldn’t pinpoint where to begin.

“I didn’t have a thing to do with this,” Turley said from around a mouthful of bread. “Girlie snuck in last night and locked herself up. Must’ve felt bad about what she did to me.” He chuckled as he leaned against the bars of his cell.

All too aware of their audience, Hawk turned without a word and strode to the door. He could hear Lina scurrying after him as Garland growled at Turley to shut his mouth.

Not until they were inside the house did Hawk stop. Lina pressed the door closed behind her and turned to face him.

He regarded her a moment. She looked the same as always, only more tired than usual. She blinked at him with those clear blue eyes, and for a moment, he thought he’d seen them before. It was an unsettling feeling, but it slid away almost as quickly as it arrived, and he was left wondering . . . everything. “I don’t know where to

start.”

Lina gave him the slightest of smiles. “I don’t know either.”

He rubbed his chin, trying to figure out which question to ask first. “How about how you came to possess my keys?”

“Oh,” she said, her face lightening as if he’d suggested she explain how to bake bread or how to put on a pair of shoes. “I’d come downstairs to talk with you, but you weren’t here and I happened to see them on the table there.” She pointed to the small end table, exactly where Hawk had thought he’d placed them.

Hawk furrowed his brow. Every instinct he possessed had been raised in suspicion since he’d discovered her in the cell, but Lina acted as if she’d come down for simple conversation and wound up just happening to take his keys. He lifted his hands to his hips, trying to make sense of it. “And so you decided to take them? Why would you do that?”

Lina sank onto the settee, as if the entire conversation had somehow exhausted her. “I’m sorry, Hawk. I shouldn’t have. But when you weren’t here, instead of waiting to ask you my questions, I thought I’d go ask them directly to Mr. Turley.”

“Turley?”

She looked up at him then and nodded, curiosity written all over her face. “Yes. You see, as I began to drift off to sleep, I remembered that the men Mr. Turley rode with had emptied one of the trunks. I couldn’t see what was in it, of course, but I thought that perhaps if you knew, then that might help you track down the other men. And Mr. Turley would certainly know, since he was there.”

Hawk stared at her a moment. Her words were so earnest, and her sweet, heart-shaped face held such innocence, he couldn’t fathom any other reason for what she’d done. He ought to be surprised she took it into her own hands to go have a conversation with an outlaw, but he wasn’t. Not after having found her the way he had. “And you thought you’d ask him yourself?”

She smiled at him then, for just a second before her face fell. “Yes. But it was dark and I’d forgotten a lamp, and well . . . you saw what happened. I was too embarrassed after that to say anything to him at all. I’m sorry. I should’ve mustered my courage and asked him anyway.”

“You should have . . .” Hawk repeated, more incredulous now than when he’d discovered her in his jail. He dropped his hands and

paced to the kitchen door, not knowing what else to do. He turned around and faced her again. "Lina. It was money. One of those pasty fellows you rode with in the coach had put his life savings into his trunk, for who knows what purposes. Apparently he got talking to the wrong man back at the last stop the stage made before the mountains, and wound up getting himself robbed."

"Oh," she said quietly. She fiddled with her skirt, folding the fabric over itself. "I thought I was helping you, but I see now I shouldn't have. Of course you already knew what was in the trunk." When she looked up at him, tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Hawk let out a rush of air. There was nothing wrong or sinister about what she'd done. She'd wanted to help him. The thought made his heart ache. How had he been so lucky as to wind up with Lina answering his advertisement? He moved to the settee and sat down beside her.

"I appreciate the thought," he said, taking her hands into his. They were so small and fragile, and if he didn't know better, he would've assumed she was a woman in need of protection. But no, instead he found a woman more than capable of not only capturing an outlaw, but one who wasn't even remotely afraid to question said outlaw. "But from now on, leave the interrogation of my prisoners to me, all right?"

She nodded. "I only wish to be helpful."

"You *are* helpful, simply by being here. Even if all you did was sleep until noon and tell me how dull life is here, your mere presence is enough for me." He lifted a hand to brush away a tendril of hair that had fallen into her face. His words had made her smile and tears retreat.

"I don't generally sleep until noon," she said with a little smile.

"And I appreciate that." Hawk paused, an idea forming in his mind. "How about tomorrow, I take you on a tour of sorts of the town and introduce you to some of the other ladies here?"

"I'd love that," Lina replied. She looked toward the kitchen. "I imagine you've already had breakfast?"

"If a slice of bread counts as breakfast, then yes."

She laughed and stood, letting go of his hands. "It does not. I'll cook up something good and bring it over to you and Deputy Garland."

Hawk wasn't about to argue with that, but he did have a favor

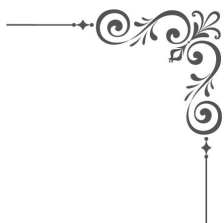
to ask of her. "I know this is a lot to ask, considering the circumstances, but when you cook, would you mind including Turley in our number? I'm obligated to feed the prisoners in our jail."

"I understand," she said. "I'll include him. I suppose." She pulled a face, and Hawk laughed.

"Thank you." On a whim, he leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Lina's face turned pink the moment he backed away, and he wanted to laugh with happiness. "I'll see you in a bit," he said

She nodded, and Hawk nearly whistled as he shut the door behind him, thoughts of kissing Lina pushing every other worry out of his mind.



Chapter Nine

TRUE TO HIS WORD, THE next day Hawk arrived home at two o'clock in the afternoon, ready to show Lina the town.

She was ready, wearing a simple skirt and bodice of soft blue, a dress that she always thought brought out the color of her eyes. It was older, not as nice as the pink she'd worn for the wedding. But she couldn't stomach wearing the sage again after traveling in it for so long. She had only the one summer hat, an older but pretty straw bonnet with a white ribbon that cascaded over the brim.

Hawk smiled upon seeing her. "You look lovely in that dress."

Lina's cheeks warmed and she looked down, wishing her face would stop giving away her every emotion. She took his outstretched hand and followed him out the door, where he tucked her hand around his arm as they walked toward the road.

She glanced up at him as they passed his office. He cut quite the figure, even in his usual workday clothing. Lina thought that any woman might be proud to be Hawk's wife—and somehow, that woman was her.

He'd been infinitely patient at her mishap in his jail the day before. The unexpected guilt she'd felt at lying to him about her reasons for being there had brought tears to her eyes. She almost wished he hadn't been so nice. It would be so much easier to accomplish what she'd come here to do if he'd been angry with her. And yet, she reminded herself, if she'd aroused his suspicion with her foolish actions, she would never be able to find information about Papa's treasure.

Mad Dog Gulch. That was the name of the place mentioned in the letter to Hawk that she'd found in the wardrobe. Papa and his men had been seen there. Perhaps they'd even spent a significant

amount of time there. She wished she knew more about the place, about what Papa had done there, but for now, that was all she had to go on. And it was one more clue than she'd had before.

"Mrs. Pryor runs the boardinghouse with her husband," Hawk said as they approached a nondescript wooden building with a sign that read simply, *Boardinghouse Rooms for Rent*. "Their clientèle often leaves one wondering, but the Pryors themselves are good people."

Mrs. Pryor was a round, pink-faced woman about ten years Lina's senior. She was quick with a smile and took one of Lina's hands in hers to welcome her to Perseverance. "I'm so happy to meet you," she said. "We ladies are greatly outnumbered here, but we look out for each other. If you ever need anything, please come and see me."

Heartened by Mrs. Pryor's generous welcome, Lina looked forward to meeting the other ladies. Hawk next introduced her to Miss Danforth, who wore a pistol on her hip and ran a laundry out of her home, much like Lina had done back in Kansas—but without the sidearm. Lina met the postmaster's wife and the mercantile owner's wife, who she'd seen but not spoken with on her previous trip to the store. And then finally, Mrs. Garner, a widowed woman who operated a small diner sandwiched between two saloons. Mrs. Garner invited her to take tea the following Thursday, and Lina eagerly agreed.

"Billy Morrell acts as a sort of guard for Mrs. Garner's establishment when he isn't working for us," Hawk told Lina as they left the diner with two slices of cake in hand, a gift from Mrs. Garner.

"I imagine she has her hands full with that location," Lina remarked.

"The citizens of this town have a vested interest in keeping the lawless element to a minimum. Thanks to people like Miss Danforth and Billy Morrell and a number of others, it stays that way." Hawk shielded his eyes against the sun as they made their way down the board sidewalk. "I wish I could say the same for the Pass or Mad Dog Gulch."

Lina glanced up at him at the mention of that town, but Hawk said nothing else on the matter. "How far away is Mad Dog Gulch?" she asked, hoping her question sounded like innocent curiosity.

"Not far. About an hour's ride to the south. They have a town

marshal whose job is merely to prevent men from killing each other too frequently.” When Lina’s eyes widened, Hawk added, “He’s a good man, but it’s more than he can handle. I’d like to get down there more often to help out. Maybe take a few men with me.”

Lina nodded. It sounded like something that was necessary, even though it left her with a bereft sort of feeling she hadn’t expected. “Would you be gone long?”

Hawk tucked her arm more securely around his. “Not very. And it isn’t anything I plan to do immediately.” He gave her an impish grin. “And before you ask, no, it isn’t a journey you can take with me. Although I know how handy you are with a gun.”

Lina giggled. His gentle teasing made her feel as if she hadn’t a care in the world, as if all that mattered was Hawk and herself and whatever they managed to build between them. *That isn’t true*, something in the back of her mind reminded her, but for a moment, Lina shoved the responsibilities away. Instead, she breathed in the fresh air that came down from the mountains, admired the sturdy little town, and reveled in the feel of Hawk’s arm fitted securely around hers. And she wondered if this was how most girls her age felt each day—carefree and full of hope.

At the edge of town, the road continued, a dusty trail that cut through the sagebrush and grasses, heading south along the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and toward, Lina presumed, Mad Dog Gulch before finally reaching New Mexico Territory. A handful of trees sprung up here and there, and the grasses waved in the breeze. All felt right with the world, and Lina let out a contented sigh.

“It’s something to see, isn’t it?” Hawk said, looking out over the vastness of the land.

“It is. It’s so different from Kansas with these mountains. I’m used to looking out over perfectly flat land.”

“The mountains are what struck me the most when I arrived too,” Hawk said. “Where I grew up in Texas, there isn’t much besides cattle and dust.”

“What made you come here?” Lina looked up at him.

“My father.” Hawk smiled sadly, still looking out over the land.

Lina didn’t speak, sensing there was more he wanted to say.

“He’s the one that gave me my name. Hawk,” he added at Lina’s curious look. “Said I could see to shoot better than the hawks in the sky.” He paused, likely turning the fond memory over in his mind.

“My family had a small ranch. It wasn’t much, but my pa was proud of it and worked hard to build it. He was out one day when a band of outlaws came by and demanded his horse. Pa refused, and they shot him.”

Lina covered her mouth, her heart ripping in two for Hawk.

“I was fifteen. My brothers and I were up at the house, messing around when we should have been working. I always wondered what would have happened if one of us was with him. If he would have survived . . .”

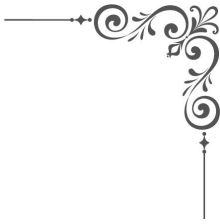
Lina squeezed his arm, wanting him to know she was here and that she felt his sorrow all too much. He glanced down at her and smiled just a little.

“It about broke my mother, and it made me want to do something,” he continued. “To stop things like that from happening to other people. I wound up finding my way to the Colorado Territory, working as a deputy here and there, until I landed in Perseverance. I was here maybe a month when the sheriff I was working for died of influenza. And here I am.”

“Here you are.” Lina held his gaze until she thought she might get lost in his warm eyes. When she blinked and finally looked away, she felt unstable, as if everything she’d thought and known was up for questioning.

As Hawk led her back toward home, the joy she’d felt at his protective touch and his desire for her to enjoy being part of his town faded into a persistent hum of guilt. It sat in the back of her throat, like she’d swallowed a lemon.

His father had been killed by an outlaw. Hawk would never forgive her if he knew who she really was.



Chapter Ten

A WEEK PASSED, AND Hawk fell into the pleasant rhythm of returning to a warm home filled with the scents of supper each evening. Lina had even taken it upon herself to edge some of his plain curtains with lace, which lent a soft and welcoming feel to the front room.

After supper, they'd talk of any number of things. Fond memories of siblings, Lina's dear neighbors in Kansas, Hawk adventures as a sheriff. Lina continued to show a great interest in his work, and although Hawk certainly hadn't expected it, he enjoyed telling her about various nefarious characters and perilous moments.

"When I brought over the noon meal the other day, one of your men mentioned a big shootout up in the mountains. He said something about how you'd gone to negotiate with one of the outlaws when the shooting started?" Lina peered at the stitches in her embroidery as she spoke.

Hawk sat back, the memory of that day coming back as if it had occurred only the day before, when in fact, it had been the previous autumn. "That was Joseph Grayson's gang." It had been a grisly affair, and he debated how much to share with Lina. She certainly didn't recoil from any of the harsher aspects of his work, but he felt far too protective of her to talk about anything that might cause her distress.

When he looked up, she was watching him expectantly. She quickly ducked her head and picked up her needle. Hawk chewed his lip to keep from laughing. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve Lina, but it seemed God had found the perfect wife for a man like him. "Joseph Grayson and his men were wanted for a

handful of train robberies farther north in the Territory, and had begun preying on the stagecoaches once the railroad wised up and started placing guards on the trains. We caught wind from some of the miners that they were holed up in the mountains, up past where the prospectors are on Navarro Creek, at Horsethief Pass.”

“The same place my stage was help up?” Lina asked.

“The very same, just a little farther down the road. We headed up there and arrived in late afternoon. It was late fall, so the sun was already low in the sky. It wasn’t hard to discover where they were hiding. I suppose they hadn’t expected anyone to come looking up there. When it became clear we knew where they were, one of them fired off a warning shot.”

Lina’s embroidery lay forgotten in her lap. She watched him with rapt attention, and Hawk warmed inside—yet again—at her interest.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I put down my guns and walked out in front of my men, my hands up—”

A knock sounded at the door, making Lina jump. Hawk rose, his story momentarily forgotten as he answered the door. He opened it to find Garland and beckoned him inside.

“Evening, Mrs. Rodgers,” Garland said, his hat clutched in his hands as he nodded at Lina.

“Good evening,” she replied. “Would you like something to drink? Or we have some food left from supper if you’re hungry.”

“No, thank you, ma’am. I’ve come to fetch the sheriff.”

Lina set her embroidery to the side and excused herself to the kitchen, presumably to give them privacy.

“What is it?” Hawk asked. The look on Garland’s face indicated trouble, and trouble, Hawk had learned, was best dealt with as quickly as possible, before it had time to spread.

“We had a rider up from Mad Dog Gulch. Says he was sent by Marshal Beech. They’ve got men rampaging through town, causing a ruckus and scaring folks. The marshal’s confronted them, told them to leave, but they’re too much for him and those two deputies. He’s sent for help.”

“Let’s ride on down there and see what we can do. Can you round up Jackson—”

“Already done,” Garland said, replacing his hat.

Hawk nodded. Garland was smart and would make a good

sheriff one day. Until he figured that out, Hawk would be thankful to have him. "I'll meet you at the office in a few minutes."

After seeing Garland out, Hawk informed Lina about the situation.

"Mad Dog Gulch?" she repeated. "Will you be all right?"

Her concern felt like a blanket around his shoulders. Who knew leaving to do the job he loved would be so difficult now that she was here? "I'll be just fine. Don't you worry. Go on to sleep, and I'll see you when I return in the morning."

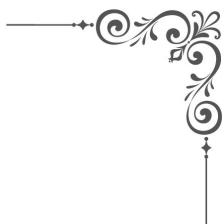
He lifted a hand and cupped her cheek, ever so gently. She didn't pull away, instead closing her eyes. And in that moment, Hawk didn't want to go. He'd much prefer to remain here, to see what would happen if he leaned forward and placed just a whisper of a kiss against her lips.

But he didn't. Instead, he relished the feel of her skin under his hand for a half-second longer before pulling away. He took one last glance at her before he left, her beautiful sun-colored hair falling in a few escaped tendrils around her face, and those unforgettable eyes on him.

Joseph Grayson. The memory was a startling thought. That was where he'd seen that color of eyes before. He might never have remembered it save for the story he'd been telling her. It was the strangest coincidence, and yet life was full of such unexplainable things. No one had a claim on eye color, though, and Hawk much preferred replacing the memory of that outlaw with Lina's pretty face.

And as he closed the door behind him, his mind wandered to the future and a whole passel of children with those clear, summer-day eyes.

He believed he might have just fallen in love with his wife.



Chapter Eleven

LINA ACTED QUICKLY as soon as Hawk left the house. Well, as quickly as she could given that her mind still spun from his sweet gesture. She could have fallen right into his arms when he'd placed his hand on her cheek like that. Fallen right into him and surrendered everything she'd come here for.

Persuading the livery owner to give her Hawk's second horse was easy compared to trying to follow the men in the dark without being seen. It was a fine line, staying back just far enough to remain hidden but managing to keep them in sight. Lina suspected that Red the horse would know his way back home if she lost sight of Hawk and his men. But that wouldn't get her any closer to learning more about her father's money.

She was acting on impulse with very little information to go on, that she knew. But it was the only clue she had from that letter, and this might be her only opportunity to see it through. Hawk had come so close to telling her about the conversation he'd had with her father, and Lina figured that if she found nothing in Mad Dog Gulch, she could somehow get Hawk to tell her the rest of the story.

The town arose like a ghost in the night, a few windows here and there ablaze with lamp or firelight. Lina heard the shouts before she saw the people causing them. Hawk and his men rode directly into town; Lina hung back, halting Red and trying to figure out what to do.

She'd given some thought to a plan as she'd ridden, but now, faced with a town that was clearly out of control, she questioned whether she'd entirely taken leave of her senses. What woman strode into a town like this, alone and at night?

Lina drew in a deep breath. She was Joseph Groves' daughter.

And Papa had been a man who would have done anything necessary to help his children survive—and he'd died for it. It was up to her now to help Matthew. No one was coming to their rescue.

She pressed her shoulders back and nudged the horse forward and off to the left, hoping to enter the town from a less obvious place than the road. That idea paid off, and she tied Red to a tree just beyond the rear of some buildings.

Stepping silently between two darkened buildings, Lina emerged at the road. There was no civilized board sidewalk here, as there was in Perseverance, only a dusty road that Lina imagined grew muddy and filthy when it rained. She was near the south edge of the town, and the road to the left was undisturbed, but when she looked to the right, it was an entirely different story.

Figures milled about on the road and in front of several buildings and tent structures that must have served as some sort of businesses. There were shouts and men on horseback—Hawk's men, Lina hoped—moving through the crowd. The sound of shattering glass nearly made Lina turn and race back to Red, but she forced herself to remain where she was. Laughter followed, and then a gunshot.

Lina ducked back beside the closest building, a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. What was she doing here? She was as likely to get killed as she was to find out anything about Papa's money.

More yelling echoed down the road, but at least there were no other gunshots. Lina peered around the building again, this time taking stock of what businesses looked as if they'd contain people who might have known Papa. If she could just find someone who'd spoken with him while he was here, they might remember something important he'd said.

And at this point, *any* clue was better than nothing at all.

It was impossible to see the names of any of the businesses from this perspective. Gathering every ounce of bravery she possessed—and a good amount of hope that Hawk would remain occupied at the far end of town where the ruckus was occurring—Lina stepped away from her hiding place and began moving along the road.

She stayed close to the buildings, her eyes peeled for anyone who might be lurking nearby. A mere three buildings down, a door flung open and a man tottered out, clearly in his cups. Lina flattened herself against the wall, but the man was far too interested

in what was happening down the road that he never looked her way.

Lina forced herself to leave the safety of the wall. She stepped just far enough away from the building to read the crudely-made sign that hung above the door. *Saloon*. No particular name—simply *Saloon*.

Well, a saloon was the most probable place she'd find information about Papa. Lina peered through one of the windows. A handful of other women were inside, among all the men who filled the chairs. She didn't want to guess at their occupation, but at least she wouldn't be the only female present in the establishment.

With a last glance down the road where the people still gathered, Lina eased the door open and slid inside. One man eyed her with undisguised curiosity from a nearby table, but not another soul seemed to notice she'd entered the place. The noise from conversations pressed against Lina's ears. It was full inside, but not overly crowded, and she took a moment to look around and consider what to do next.

Stepping into the place required courage enough, but talking to the men who patronized such an establishment? All Lina wanted to do was turn and flee into the night, back to the safety of Red and Perseverance.

No, she told herself. She'd come all the way here—to Mad Dog Gulch, to the Colorado Territory, to Hawk—to find answers for Matthew. She couldn't let him down. She *wouldn't*.

And with that, she took decisive steps toward the bar. The barkeep appeared friendly enough, wasn't likely to be rude to her, and probably overheard every conversation that happened in his establishment. She reached the long wooden counter a few steps away from a man who appeared to be wearing the teeth of some wild animal on a length of cording around his neck. Lina tried not to stare, instead focusing her attention on the man behind the scarred counter.

When he saw her, he looked her up and down and furrowed his considerable eyebrows. "Don't get many ladies in here," he finally said, slinging a filthy cloth over his shoulder.

Lina hadn't realized she looked so different from the other women in the saloon, but now that the barkeep had pointed it out, she felt more visible than ever. "Good evening," she said, her voice shaking only a little.

“You want a drink?”

Lina hadn't brought a penny with her, not even considering that money might come in useful on this venture. She did at least have her father's revolver, hidden away in her pocket. “I apologize, I failed to bring any coins with me.”

The man made a sound between a scoff and groan. He began to turn away.

“No, wait. Please,” Lina called to him.

He paused, looked around, and then leaned against the bar counter. “Little lady, if you have a brain left in that head of yours, I suggest you use it to get on out of here. More than one fellow's already taken notice of you, and not in a way I gather you'd like.”

Lina swallowed. Here she thought she was moving through the saloon almost invisible. But this man saw far more than she did, and that was exactly why she needed to speak with him. “I'll be quick, then. I'm looking for some information—about Joseph Grayson and his men. He was killed around here a while back, you might remember.”

“I remember.” The barkeep's tone was clipped, and he narrowed his eyes as he watched her.

“I'm specifically needing to know where he might have set up camp, or what specific areas he frequented. If you know—or if you know someone who does—I'd greatly appreciate you telling me. It's very important.” Lina finished, the words rushing out of her mouth like an overflowing stream after a spring rain.

“Important, huh.” The barkeep shifted his gaze to somewhere off behind her, before coming back to land on Lina. His eyes were a watery sort of blue-green, and the rims were too pink as if he'd not gotten enough sleep. He leaned in closer, dropping his voice. “I'll give you a useful bit of information, and I won't repeat this, so listen up good.”

Lina leaned forward, so close she could smell his tobacco-scented breath. “Yes?”

“Don't go around asking after folks, particularly men like that. You'll attract a bad sort of trouble. I suggest you get right back where you came from. Now.” And with that, he stood up and backed away, moving to the next customer.

Lina rested her head in her hands. If the barkeep wouldn't help her, who would? Someone in this pit of a town had to know *something*. And she wasn't asking for all that much—just a location

or two. Someplace she could focus her search. Surely that wouldn't get anyone into trouble.

She dropped her hands to the rough counter, sticky with spilled whiskey. Well, there had to be more than one saloon in this town. And if this barkeep was no help, perhaps the next one would be. She wished she'd brought some coins, something to persuade them to talk to her. Maybe if she batted her eyelashes and simpered a little more—as repugnant as that idea was—she'd find her answers.

She stepped back and turned—right into a man with a moth-eaten hat and several missing teeth. “I’m sorry, I . . .” Lina stepped back, right into the counter. But the man stayed put, and as Lina searched for a way around him, her eyes rose to find a ring of men gathered behind him, each one dirtier and fiercer-looking than the last.

The fellow with the missing teeth grinned at her. “I hear you’re asking after a dead man.”

Lina’s stomach fluttered and her heart beat faster than she thought possible. The barkeep had been right. She was naive and should never have come in this place. *Don’t show fear*. The words echoed in her mind. Dropping her hands to her sides, she stood as tall as possible. The feel of the pistol in her skirt pocket lent her confidence. “What I discuss is none of your concern, sir.”

“Sir.” One of the men, the tallest, biggest man with pockmarks dotting his face, elbowed his neighbor and guffawed.

But the man in front of Lina was unmoved. “What do you know about Grayson—and his money?”

Lina blinked at him. How would this mess of a man know about Papa’s money? Or was she even more naive for not considering Papa might have had associates who’d survived the encounter with Hawk and his men? Associates who knew about the treasure. Associates like . . . this man?

Lina tilted her head, studying the man in front of her. Was it possible he’d known her father? If he did, he certainly didn’t know where the money was. If he was smart at all, he would have already searched every place they’d been.

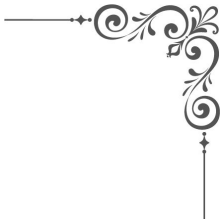
Which meant he hadn’t ridden with Papa. He was acting on something he’d heard third hand.

“I know about as much as you do—nothing,” she replied.

“Hmm. We’ll see about that.”

And without a warning, the man grabbed both her arms and

began dragging her toward the door.



Chapter Twelve

HAWK SIGHED. IT WAS going to take more than one night in Mad Dog Gulch to put an end to things like this happening. Angry men had too much to drink and then took out their discontent on the town. And there were far too many of them in this town for the marshal to handle. He needed more men—men who wouldn't back down, who'd hold their ground, and who didn't show a lick of fear.

And for now, that was him, Garland, and the rest of his men from Perseverance.

He'd sent Jackson down the opposite side of the road to check on those businesses, while Garland stayed with the others to ensure tempers had cooled and to help Marshal Beech round up any troublemaking stragglers. Hawk himself went door to door on the east side of the town's main road, stopping into saloons and any other place that appeared open, and checking the windows and doors of places shut up for the night.

He was just beginning to breathe easier when a knot of men tumbled from the last saloon on the road. He paused and squinted through the darkness. A couple of the men appeared to be shuffling along . . . was that a woman?

A high-pitched shriek and a flash of skirts confirmed Hawk's suspicion. He took decisive steps forward, his hand resting on the pistol at his side. "You there!" he called out. "Unhand the lady."

The men stopped still, the big one in the front blocking Hawk's view of the woman they'd drug out from the saloon.

"That ain't no lady," a surly fellow, pink in the face with a shock of red hair under a dirty dun-colored hat, said.

"Your opinion of the woman doesn't matter. It appears she doesn't wish to accompany you, so I'll ask one last time—let her

go.” Hawk let his fingers curl around the grip of the revolver, ready to draw if the need presented itself. He’d had more than enough excitement for one night, and he hoped the men would use sense, unhand the woman, and be on their way. Across the road, Jackson paused in his inspection of the buildings on that side to watch the situation unfold.

The one who appeared to be the leader of the group shoved aside the bigger man in the front. He held the lady by the arm and pulled her with him as another man gripped her other arm.

She stumbled forward, her sky blue skirts a stark contrast to the men’s unwashed clothing. She wore no hat, and her blonde hair had begun coming loose from its pins. Hawk squinted again. That hair . . . it was uncanny the resemblance to—

He sucked in a breath when her face tilted up. *Lina*. What in the world was she doing here? A hundred different emotions coursed through Hawk’s veins as he dragged his eyes from his wife to the men who held her in his grip. Anger, fear, rage, confusion—they crashed and ran together, and it was all he could do to keep a lid on it all.

He squeezed the grip of the revolver and gritted his teeth together as the man with the filthy hat and missing teeth said something to him. Hawk didn’t hear a word of it. He was vaguely aware of Jackson crossing the road toward him.

“I swear with everything that’s in me, if you don’t take your hands off that woman right now, I’ll see you all in a grave quicker than you can take your last breath.” His words were measured, belying everything that churned inside him.

The big man grunted and nodded to where Jackson stood nearby, his rifle raised.

The ringleader glanced at Jackson, and then back to Hawk. He narrowed his eyes as he studied the badge on Hawk’s chest. “All right, Sheriff. Whatever you say.” He shoved Lina away from him and toward Hawk, adding, “But we ain’t done yet, girlie.”

Hawk pushed Lina behind him and stood planted where he was. The men finally loped away, into the street and toward the busier part of town.

Jackson’s eyes flicked from Lina to Hawk. “You all right?”

Hawk nodded, even though *all right* was the furthest from how he truly felt. “Thanks for the back up.”

“I’ll finish this end of town, if you want to . . .” Jackson didn’t

finish the sentence. He didn't need to. Somehow Hawk had come to Mad Dog Gulch to subdue chaos and wound up finding his wife in the midst of it all.

After Jackson had continued on down the road, Hawk finally turned to Lina. Questions fought for answers, and the one that finally made it to his lips was simply, "Why?"

Lina pressed her lips together as she fumbled with her hair. Finally giving up, she pulled the pins away and made quick work of it with a braid that hung down her back. "I . . . Well, I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. I wanted to see you work." She tapped the side of her skirts. "I brought my revolver, but they acted so quickly, I couldn't reach for it."

He stared at her a moment. It was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. And if she thought he believed her . . .

White hot irritation rose up his throat. "Fine. We'll discuss this at home. I presume you have Red?"

She nodded, her teeth biting into her lip. Hawk held out a hand, gesturing for her to lead the way.

It turned out she'd tied up the horse just east of town. He helped her mount without a word, and silently, he walked beside her and the horse back to town, where he quickly explained the situation to a befuddled Garland and retrieved his own horse.

Silence reigned their entire ride back to Perseverance, Hawk's annoyance growing every minute Lina refused to speak.

Back at the house, he assisted her in dismounting—although it was quite clear by now she was capable of doing such a thing without help—and gathered both horses' reins to take them back to the livery.

"Can I trust you'll be here when I return?" he asked.

"Where else would I go?" Lina attempted a smile, but dropped it immediately when Hawk's expression didn't change.

"That's a good question." And after seeing her inside, he led the horses to the livery, paid the night stableboy an extra coin for his trouble, and returned home.

Lina was nowhere to be found on the ground floor. At the base of the stairs, Hawk gripped the banister and looked up into the shadows before climbing to the second floor.

"Lina," he said through the closed door.

Footsteps sounded from inside the room, and then the door slowly opened to reveal Lina, still fully dressed as if she were

waiting on him to make an appearance. He stood silent a moment, hoping she'd simply tell him the truth with prompting.

She gave him a tight smile but said nothing at all.

"I don't understand," he said, finally breaking the silence. "I don't know what would possess you to go through all that trouble, to ride all the way to Mad Dog Gulch, in the dark, when you *knew* there was trouble about. You'll have to fill me in, because, Lina, I simply can't come up with an answer."

She blinked those blue eyes at him, never shirking from his gaze. "I already told you."

He stared at her a moment. That couldn't be the truth. Not with the way she clenched her hands at her sides, or the way something approaching guilt flickered in her eyes. "Lina," he said again, letting the tone of his voice indicate he didn't believe her.

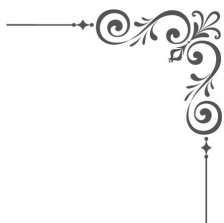
She dropped her eyes and swallowed, and for a moment, he thought she might be on the verge of confiding in him.

"You can tell me," he said, more softly this time. "Are you in trouble? You're my wife. I can help you."

Her gaze drifted back up and she clasped her hands in front of her. Hawk waited, but all she did was shake her head. He ran a hand through his head and let out a frustrated sigh. "Fine." And then he turned and stomped down the stairs.

Unable to lie down, Hawk paced the parlor, running the events of the evening through his head. But the only conclusion he came to was that Lina certainly was in some sort of trouble—and it was something she was too ashamed of to share with him.

But what in the world could it be?



Chapter Thirteen

LINA BARELY SLEPT A wink. So many worries crowded her mind she could hardly decide which one deserved precedence.

As she rose and dressed in the morning, the look on Hawk's face the night before haunted her thoughts. He'd been angry, as she'd expected. But then they'd come home, and he'd gotten that concerned look and asked if she needed some kind of help. The words had pierced straight through Lina's soul. She had to look away because half of her wanted to spill everything about Papa right at that moment, and the other half wanted to reach up and run her fingers over the lines that had formed around his worried eyes.

The only reason she hadn't confided in him was the thought of his reaction. That loving expression he'd held would turn horrified, and then cold. He'd know she hadn't come here for the reasons she'd professed, and that would be that. He'd send her back on the first stage out.

Although, given his reaction when she hadn't confessed her reason for following him, she wondered if he hadn't decided late last night to have their union annulled. No man as good as Hawk would tolerate a liar and a sneak under his own roof.

And so as she descended the stairs, Lina prepared for the worst. But Hawk was nowhere to be found. His hat and gunbelt were gone from the parlor, the blanket on the settee neatly folded. Lina exhaled. Surely if he meant to end their marriage, he'd have waited around until she arose to inform her of that decision. Now she only had to wait until the noon hour to see his disappointed expression when she delivered him lunch.

Lina rubbed her hands together. The early mornings here held a

chill, despite the fact that it was late August. As she lit a fire in the stove and warmed her hands, she contemplated the other worry that had invaded her sleep—the men she'd met in Mad Dog Gulch.

The fact that they'd essentially tried to kidnap her was terrifying enough, but what was almost worse was the knowledge that they were looking for the exact same thing Lina was—Papa's missing money. In an odd way, she almost wished she could have heard more. For instance, where they had already searched. But thankfully Hawk had shown up and—

Lina covered her face with her hands as she remembered the incredulous look he gave when he saw her there. Her plan had been to return to Perseverance before he'd ever even left Mad Dog Gulch for home. But that wasn't how it worked out. Instead, he'd saved her from those men.

Her cheeks grew warm as she remembered Hawk's bravery—all for her. No wonder he'd tamed this town. And no wonder he was the one who'd put an end to her father's robbing and stealing. And yet . . . he was also the one who'd gone up to talk with Papa. Most lawmen would've shot first, and forgot the talking altogether. But not Hawk.

Lina stood up and assembled a hasty breakfast for herself. The sooner she discovered Papa's money, the faster she could end this deception. And if she did it all quickly and quietly, Hawk might never need to know.

She paused, her knife held just over the loaf of bread. Was it possible? Could she finish her work here, find the money, *and* remain married to Hawk?

Lina's heart beat faster at the thought. If Matthew received the treatment he needed, he could potentially live a normal life. He could find work, get married, and not need his sister to look after him and ensure he didn't smother himself in the pillow when a convulsion came on. And that meant Lina herself could remain married.

She could have a life here with Hawk.

Her hands nearly shook at the thought, one she'd never truly considered possible and one she realized she desperately wanted. She hadn't expected to come here and fall in love with Hawk, and yet that was exactly what was happening.

But first, she needed to find the money.

Lina ate as quickly as possible and set out into the morning. It

was an overcast day, one that threatened rain that may or may not come. But Lina barely paid attention to the clouds. She had one goal on her mind.

She needed to find out what precisely happened before the shootout that killed Papa. Specifically, what did Papa tell Hawk? And Hawk was not the person she could ask, not after last night. He'd come so close to telling her before, but if she pressed him to continue the story now, he might grow suspicious, particularly after what she'd done and her reticence to tell him the truth.

Instead, she'd ask one of his men. After considering the possibilities, she'd decided upon Billy Morrell. Not only was he the youngest, but it had been quite clear that he'd been taken with her upon her arrival. Lina felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of using that to her advantage, but she was desperate. She *had* to find that money before those men in Mad Dog Gulch did, and before Hawk could grow more suspicious and decide his feelings for her weren't worth the hassle of keeping her around.

Finding Mr. Morrell wasn't too difficult. He was at Mrs. Garner's diner, leaning on a wall near the door and keeping an eye on the breakfast customers. Lina glanced around the small dining room. Not a soul here looked ready to start a fight or run without paying for his food. Then again, she doubted breakfast was generally a rowdy time in Perseverance.

"Good morning, Mr. Morrell," she said with a smile.

He looked up at her and immediately stood up straight. "Morning, Mrs. Rodgers. You . . . ah . . . coming in for some breakfast?"

"Oh, no, I ate at home. I thought I might stop by and say hello to Mrs. Garner, but she appears to be very busy at the moment." Lina waved to Mrs. Garner, who had looked up from the table she was serving. She waved back before scurrying back to what Lina presumed was her kitchen.

"She does a good business here. Only place in town, save for the boardinghouse but their food is barely edible most days," Mr. Morrell said.

Finding a way to ask him was going to be the most difficult part. Lina thought for a moment, and then asked, "Do you see much trouble here?"

"At Mrs. Garner's? Not too much lately. Sometimes in the evenings close to her closing time, but folks are getting more

respectable here day by day.”

“That’s good to know. I’m sure it’s reassuring to Mrs. Garner to have you here though.” Lina shot Mr. Morrell a smile, and he grinned in return.

“Thank you, ma’am. That’s awfully kind of you to say.”

Lina studied his face. He had to be about her age, maybe a year or so younger. “Have you been working for the sheriff for very long?”

“Nearly a year now.” Mr. Morrell tilted his chin up as if he were proud of his work.

“I know he’s glad to have men he can rely on, like you.” Lina figured a little flattery wouldn’t hurt her cause. “He started to tell me about one time last fall, when you all had some outlaws surrounded up in the mountains.”

“Grayson?” Mr. Morrell asked. When Lina nodded, he said, “I’ll never forget that. Those were the most dangerous men I’d ever been around.”

“Hawk didn’t get to finish the story.” Lina paused. “Would you tell me what happened? I’m absolutely dying to know how it ended.”

Mr. Morrell grinned as if he couldn’t think of anything he’d rather do. “Well, we had them cornered up at Horsethief Pass. Hawk yelled a few times for them to surrender. A couple hours go by, and we don’t hear a peep—till the leader himself, Joseph Grayson, comes out, with his rifle raised up high in the air and asks to talk. Jackson and Garland and the others, they thought it was a trap, and to be honest, ma’am, I sure thought so too. But Hawk thought different. That took some guts, him going over there unarmed to talk to the man.”

Lina’s breath caught in her throat. She shouldn’t have expected any less, not from Hawk.

“So Hawk and this Grayson fella, they sat and talked for some time. Then Hawk came out and just as he started back across the road, one of our men, a real twitchy one named Yount—he’s done and gone up to join the Army at Fort Garland now—he thought one of Grayson’s men was going to shoot, so he shot first. You can imagine what happened after that. They shot back, and we shot, and while Hawk made it back unharmed, Grayson and a bunch of his men didn’t survive.”

“It’s a miracle none of you were hurt,” Lina said.

“We had the upper ground,” Morrell replied. “Well, they grazed Jackson real good, but other than that, we all walked out of there just fine.”

“I wonder what Hawk and the outlaw discussed.” Lina hoped her words sounded like a musing.

“I asked him after, just ‘cause I was curious about what an outlaw might have to say. He said they talked about his surrender, what he might be facing if he gave up then.”

Lina’s heart ached at the thought. Her father would have given up everything. He’d really had no choice—die up in the mountains or face death by hanging down below. “I wonder if he had a family,” she said. “Someone he might have mentioned to Hawk. Only because I can’t see a man discussing something so final without a thought for his family,” she added quickly.

But Mr. Morrell didn’t seem startled at all by her thoughts. “I sure know I’d be talking about it if it was me. But Hawk sure didn’t say anything about it if he did.”

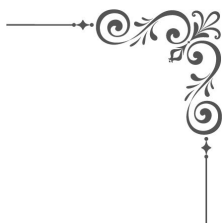
Lina’s heart sank. She dug her fingers into her skirts. She was no further along than she had been before she’d talked to Mr. Morrell. All she knew now was who shot first, and how long they’d waited up at the Pass.

How long they’d waited . . .

It was so obvious Lina had a hard time keeping her thoughts from her face. “Thank you so much for telling me the rest of the story, Mr. Morrell. I suppose I ought to get on to the mercantile.”

And before Billy Morrell could wish her goodbye, Lina was out the door and striding toward the livery.

Horsethief Pass was the answer all along.



Chapter Fourteen

THE MORNING HOURS DRAGGED like a stubborn mule in the fields. It was quiet in Perseverance today, which suited Hawk just fine. It wasn't as if he'd slept much the night before, and half his mind was preoccupied by Lina and her stubborn refusal to confide in him. Something was most definitely wrong. But what was it? And how terrible could it be that she refused to tell him?

Noon came and went, and Lina didn't appear with his lunch. He shouldn't have been surprised. She was likely angry with him over the way he'd stomped off last night.

About two o'clock, Billy Morrell stopped in between his shifts at the diner. "It's a good quiet day out there today, boss," he said, setting his hat on the desk and taking a seat.

Hawk leaned back in his own chair behind the desk. "Why does it feel like the calm before the storm?"

Billy shrugged. "Might just be that chaos down in Mad Dog Gulch last night. It's got us all on edge." He stifled a yawn.

"You ought to get some sleep," Hawk said. Billy had come back near dawn with the others, and Hawk doubted he'd slept at all before his breakfast shift sitting watch at the diner.

"I might do just that." Billy stood and took up his hat. "It was nice to see Mrs. Rodgers out this morning."

Hawk waited for him to ask about her escapades last night, but he said nothing. And not a muscle in his face belied that he knew anything. Hawk ought to have known that Jackson wouldn't have spilled a word of what he'd seen to anyone else. "Did she appear well?" Hawk asked carefully.

"She did indeed. We had a nice conversation at Mrs. Garner's. She got me talking all about last October, when we caught Grayson

and his men up at the Pass.”

Hawk's expression dropped. That was the same tale he'd been telling Lina last evening, right before Garland had come to the door. He hadn't finished, and then she'd followed him to Mad Dog Gulch. There was something else, too, something just out of reach in his mind that felt very important to remember right at that moment.

“What did you tell her?” He tried to keep his voice even and conversational.

“Not a lot.” Billy picked up his hat. “Tales of gunfights and such might scare a lady. Only that you'd gone and talked to Grayson unarmed, and that Yount got twitchy and shot, and that we'd won.”

We'd won. Hawk wasn't sure he'd put it that way. It hardly felt like winning when men died, even if they were outlaws. And while he'd never told a soul, he'd felt the worst about Grayson himself. The man seemed more concerned that his family receive a letter he would write to them than about his own fate. Hawk had spent many an hour since then wondering at the man's motivations for the life he'd pursued.

“Well, thank you for entertaining her.” Hawk saw Billy out and stood by the door, turning the conversation over in his head. There was something to all of this—to Lina's interest in that story, to her following him to Mad Dog Gulch, and maybe even to her getting herself locked up in his jail. But what was it?

He grabbed his own hat and locked up the office. His stomach was growling and he figured he ought to check on Lina. But when he arrived home, she was absent. Hawk followed his stomach to the kitchen, where he found the makings of cold chicken sandwiches sitting out. That was odd. Lina was normally fastidious with her work in the kitchen. Unless she knew he'd come looking for his lunch?

He put together a sandwich, and as he ate, he wondered where she might have gone and that led to the same thoughts that had plagued his mind back at the office. But he still couldn't figure out what he was forgetting.

Last night, she'd looked at him with those clear blue eyes and—

Her eyes. Hawk nearly choked on a bite of chicken and bread. He'd dismissed the resemblance as merely a coincidence. But was it? Or was Lina somehow related to Joseph Grayson?

It seemed impossible and yet it made too much sense at the same time. And there was one person besides Lina herself who

might know. He gulped down the remainder of the sandwich and raced back to the office.

"I didn't know the man personally," Pete Turley said when Hawk ran into the jail and demanded to know what Turley knew about Grayson's family.

"I thought you'd ridden with him?" Hawk asked. "That's what you told my deputy."

"I was exaggerating. I rode with one of his men who survived that shootout. We took up with a bunch looking to make some money fast, but they got more interested in old Grayson's buried treasure than in getting actual money." Turley leaned back against the bars. "What's got you so interested? You after the treasure now too?"

Hawk raised his eyebrows. "What treasure?"

Turley laughed and strode forward. "Supposedly Grayson had saved up all his stolen money for his family. A real righteous sort of outlaw, I guess. But I don't know much about that. Those men shot Foster—the one who'd rode with Grayson—dead when they thought he was trying to cheat them out of finding that money. I hightailed it out of the Pass then. Only went back when I joined up with those boys who had notions of robbing the stage. And that's about all I'm gonna say on that. Those fellas were decent."

Turley had told Hawk what he needed to know.

A treasure. It made so much sense. If Lina was somehow related, that had to be what she wanted. It explained why she'd come to his office that one night, why she'd gone to Mad Dog Gulch and those men that had grabbed her—

Hawk paused and turned back to Turley. "Those men who were after Grayson's treasure. What did they look like?"

"I'm not one to tell tales on folks, Sheriff, but let's just say I wouldn't be too broken up if they landed in your jail after what they did to Foster. He was a good man. Just keep my name out of it, all right?"

Hawk nodded impatiently.

"Gus Merritt was the one in charge. Mean fellow, small and missing a lot of teeth. Big Buck was just as his name said. Looks like he went to war with the pox on his face. There was a redheaded fellow and his brother—the Burtons. Went by Flame and Flax."

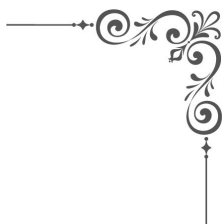
Hawk's blood went cold. Turley's descriptions matched the very group of men who'd tried to run off with Lina. "Did you say they

camped up near the Pass?”

Turley shrugged. “Don’t know if they’re still up there, but that’s where they thought the treasure was. They’d come down to the Gulch now and then. That’s where Foster and me met up with them.”

Back in his office, Hawk shut the door to the jail and leaned against it, running a hand over his face. Horsethief Pass, that had to be where Lina went. That’s where the shootout had happened, and if those men were convinced that’s where the money was, it wouldn’t have taken Lina long to come to the same conclusion.

All he could hope was that she didn’t run into them before he got up there.



Chapter Fifteen

LINA SWIPED A HAND across her forehead. The sky was still overcast, but the effort she expended with digging was more than enough to make her perspire. A few minutes more, and she threw the shovel aside.

This was impossible. There were *so* many places the money could be. And what was worse, it appeared someone else had already dug up a few spots here and there. She wasn't the first to think of this place.

Lina sat back on her heels and contemplated the empty hole she'd just dug. It made sense. Mr. Morrell had said a few hours had passed before Hawk had gone to talk to Papa. That gave Papa plenty of time to hide the money up here.

Besides, it was the only lead she had. If it wasn't here, where was it?

Would she *ever* find it?

She stood and picked up a canteen she'd found in the house. The water inside was growing warm, but it did what it needed to. She had just gone after the shovel when something rustled nearby. Lina froze, not daring to move. The rustling came again, and her heart thumped so hard she was certain that whatever was making that noise could hear it. It could be anything—a bear, a wildcat, a man.

As silently as possible, Lina dropped to her knees and began to crawl toward a stand of aspen. The spindly trees wouldn't provide much cover, but the boulders on this side of the road were too far away. She'd recognized this spot the moment she'd approached it on Red. It was only a little ways from where her stage had been held up.

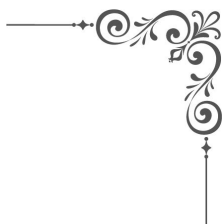
Reaching the aspen, she stood up slowly behind the trees,

forcing herself to breathe as normally as possible as she dug her dirt-encrusted nails into the tree's trunk. She scanned the area, looking for anything out of place and desperately wishing for the pistol she'd left in her saddlebag.

Seeing nothing at all, Lina had just begun to relax when a hand shot around her face and clamped itself over her mouth. Her scream died off against the dirty gloves. Frantically, she twisted her head to see who was behind her.

A man with a pockmarked face stared down at her.

And right behind him stood three other men she recognized—and one dog she did not.



Chapter Sixteen

THE RIDE UP TO HORSETHIEF Pass seemed to take four times as long as it usually did. Every step that Rabbit took felt plodding, and Hawk's anxiety for Lina ratcheted up another notch with each passing moment. He was alone as he climbed the road up into the mountains once he passed the prospectors by the creek. Before he'd left town, he paid the stable boy to find Garland, Jackson, or any of his men and tell them where Hawk was headed. With any luck, they'd be only a few minutes behind him if he ran into trouble.

As he rounded the bend into the Pass, he repeated the same prayer he'd said over and over on the way up—*Please let her be alone. Please keep her unharmed.*

He couldn't spare an extra thought to untangle his feelings for Lina from the lies she'd told. He'd deal with that later, once he ensured her safety. It didn't matter what subterfuge she'd enacted toward him—he wasn't certain he could take it if any harm had befallen her.

A low rumble of voices came from up ahead, past another bend in the road where, Hawk remembered, the shootout with Grayson and his men had occurred last year. He dismounted, tied Rabbit to a tree hidden back behind a few of its scraggly fellows, and moved forward.

He kept to the edge of the boulders until he reached the outcropping that blocked his view of where the road curved away. Pressed to the edge of the rock, he peered around. And there, just beyond the boulders where Grayson and several of his men had died, was the motley gang of men who'd grabbed Lina in Mad Dog Gulch.

For a split second, he thought Lina might not be among them.

But then he spotted Red off across the road. And a few moments later, a shift in stance by one of the men revealed Lina herself, who by all appearances, sat tied to an aspen.

Anger boiled below Hawk's calm demeanor. He couldn't see her expression from this distance, but he could imagine how she felt—frightened, helpless, and likely a good dose of angry. But at least she appeared unhurt.

His best course of action was to wait for his men to arrive, provided they came quickly enough. Hawk reined in the urge to march over there and demand Lina's release. He didn't know how these men would react, and he hadn't much of an advantage alone.

And so he remained where he was, hidden up against the outcropping, pistol at the ready, and eyes taking in the scene before him. All was well until something pressed itself to his knee. Stifling a surprised shout, Hawk jumped back and looked down.

There, with its tongue hanging out, stood a large black dog.

"Ssh, good boy," Hawk said under his breath. "Good—"

The dog promptly opened its mouth and barked. Over and over and over until every single one of the men looked his way.

He had no choice now. Hawk pointed his pistol as he pushed himself back up against the rock. "This is Hawk Rodgers, Costilla County Sheriff. I demand you set down your guns and raise your hands."

"There's nothing against the law happening here, Sheriff," the shortest man said. Gus Merritt, if what Turley had said was correct.

"Last I checked, holding a woman against her will was called kidnapping, Merritt," Hawk yelled back.

If Merritt was at all surprised Hawk knew his name, he didn't show it. He gestured at the larger man, Big Buck, who took two steps sideways until he stood next to Lina. "You're awful protective of this girl, Sheriff. Man's got to wonder why that is, given how dead set she is on finding some outlaw treasure."

Hawk wasn't about to satisfy the man's curiosity with the truth. "Everyone's entitled to the protection of the law."

"Hmmpf." Merritt glanced back at Lina and Big Buck. "How about I tell you what I see happening here. I see you, Sheriff Rodgers, leaving us be. Else I'll have Big Buck here shoot her right now."

Hawk was glad he couldn't see the look on Lina's face. It would likely only make him angrier than he was. "You do that and you'll

all be dead. I don't miss, and I guarantee that."

"We ain't got a thing to lose. Not unless we find that money. And I'm not such a bad shot myself." Merritt stood rooted in place, staring Hawk down.

This wasn't working. Merritt was right about one thing. These men were desperate, and Hawk had no reason to believe they wouldn't end Lina's life right here in these mountains, even if they thought she knew where the money was.

The big dog laid down by his feet as Hawk thought. *Dogs are a lot smarter than some people*, his father's voice, an echoed memory from the past, played in his head. The outlaws' dog had chosen Hawk, as if he knew exactly which side was in the right.

He needed another strategy. *Now*.

"You're wasting your time up here," Hawk yelled.

"Why do you say that?" Merritt replied.

"That money's not up in these mountains."

Merritt lowered his gun just a fraction of an inch, as if he was thinking hard about Hawk's words. "Now how would you know that?"

"I was the last one to talk to Grayson. In fact, we had a good, long conversation. The lady doesn't know where that money is, despite what she told you. But I sure do."

Merritt glanced at the redheaded man to his left, and if names said anything about a person, Hawk assumed the man was Flame Burton.

"So here's the deal," Hawk went on. "You turn the lady loose. And I mean completely loose. I want her on that horse and headed down this road. And then I'll tell you what Grayson told me."

"He's telling the truth." Lina's voice, assured and familiar, came from behind the men.

Merritt whipped around. "How would you know? You were up here digging, same as us."

"I became friendly with Sheriff Rodgers, and it's true he spoke with Mr. Grayson for some time before his death. In fact, Mr. Grayson even asked the Sheriff to send a letter home to his family to inform them of the treasure's location. But Sheriff Rodgers never disclosed that location to me. Why would he?"

Believe her, Hawk thought, keeping a firm grip on his revolver.

Merritt held a low conversation with the Burton brothers, and after a few tense moments, he spoke up. "We'll agree to the terms

you set out, provided you toss your guns down.”

“I’ll do that as soon as the lady is on her horse.”

Merritt paused a moment and then nodded.

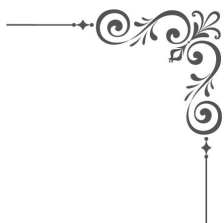
Everything seemed to move in slow motion—Big Buck untying Lina, Lina standing, Lina being led to Red with Big Buck at her side, Lina mounting the horse.

“All right, Sheriff. She’s on the horse, like you wanted,” Merritt called.

With a deep breath and a prayer he was making the right decision, Hawk tossed both his pistols to the ground, a few feet in front of him.

The moment he looked up, a shot sounded off to the left where Lina, Red, and Big Buck were. Hawk ducked to the ground as he searched for the source of the gunshot.

Twisting to his left to ensure Lina’s safety, he spotted Big Buck lying on the ground, gripping his leg. Above him sat Lina on the horse, a pistol pointed right at Merritt and the Burton brothers.



Chapter Seventeen

LINA'S GRIP ON THE revolver was steady despite the fear that raced through her veins. She'd just shot a man- in the leg—again. And now Merritt and the other two men all raised their guns at her.

A blast sounded from the right, making Lina startle in the saddle. She caught a glimpse of the redheaded man going down as she jerked her attention toward Hawk. He'd scooped up one of his pistols and fired a second time from the large rock outcropping. The other Burton brother grabbed his upper arm, grimacing in pain.

"Put the guns down!" Merritt yelled. Neither Hawk nor Lina complied. Merritt turned again, back toward Lina and held his pistol steady at her.

Not a second too late, Lina slid from Red, tapping him from behind to get him to run to safety. He did, and she hit the ground just in time to hear Merritt's bullet fly over her head.

More gunfire sounded as Big Buck groaned from nearby, but Lina didn't dare lift her head. She stayed put, praying harder than she ever had in her life. For Hawk to survive. For Merritt and his men to give up and surrender. For all of this to be over.

She didn't even want the money anymore. She'd find some other way to help Matthew. That money was tainted, stolen from companies to which her father had no right, and all of this was happening because of that. No good could come of it. It had caused too much pain, too much deceit, too much death. She wished she'd realized that before she'd come up here and put Hawk's life in danger.

She prayed that money was buried and gone forever.

Lina stayed where she was, praying and hoping, her arms over her head, until a hand laid itself on her back. She startled, sitting up

and half-expecting to see Big Buck or Merritt there, gloating about having killed Hawk.

Instead, it was Hawk himself, dirty and disheveled but very much alive. Lina took one look at his face and threw her arms around his neck, tears escaping her eyes and soaking into his hair and collar.

"It's all right," he said in a soothing voice she didn't deserve. He wrapped his arms around her. "It's over now."

Lina drew in a shuddering breath and lifted her head. She couldn't form a word, so instead, she looked around them. Garland was there, checking the wound on Big Buck's leg, and behind him, Hawk's other men were gathering up Merritt and the Burton brothers.

Hawk was right—it was over.

Except it wasn't, not for Lina or Hawk.

"You came for me." It was the only thing she could think to say.

"Of course I did." He looked her up and down before taking her hands in his. "Are you hurt?"

So long as she didn't consider the guilt that ate up her heart, she was fine. Lina nodded. "Hawk, I . . ." She looked down at their hands. "I am so sorry. For everything."

"You don't have to talk about it now," he said, his expression guarded.

"I do." Lina thought she might burst if she didn't get the thoughts out of her mind right now. "First, you must know I didn't come here to hurt you. That was never my intention. I wanted only to find the money to help my brother. Matthew and I . . . we had nothing. Papa had been promising riches when he returned, money that would pay for Matthew to go East and receive the treatment he needs so badly. But he never returned."

"Joseph Grayson is your father." Hawk said this matter-of-factly, as if the revelation didn't surprise him at all.

"Yes. Grayson was an assumed name, so no one could connect his crimes to us." Lina paused. "How did you know?"

Hawk smiled—just slightly—and tapped the bridge of her nose. "You have the same eyes. It took me a while to put it together, but when I did, it was quite obvious."

"Oh," Lina said. He still held her hands. She didn't know what that meant, but she didn't deserve it. She pulled her hands from his and clasped them together.

“Why did you answer my letter?” Hawk asked after a moment.

Lina closed her eyes, remembering all too vividly that moment in her kitchen when she made the connection between him and the sheriff that had put an end to Joseph Grayson and his gang. She opened her eyes and looked straight into his. She had had enough of lies and deceit.

“Because I knew you were the sheriff who had surrounded my father and his men. You were the last one to talk to him before he died. I had hoped I might find some clue here that would lead me to the treasure, or that you might tell me something useful.”

Hawk didn’t flinch. Of course he didn’t. But that didn’t mean that what she said didn’t hurt him inside.

“That may have been why I came here,” she continued. “But the reason I remained grew more complicated.”

Hawk raised his eyebrows, and Lina plunged forward. She would bare her heart to him. And if he rejected her, as she knew he ought to, she would leave. But at least she would go knowing she’d done the right thing. She could nurse her battered heart back in Kansas—alone.

“I fell in love with you,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I am sorry to tell you that now. When we return to Perseverance, I’ll pack my things. I’ll go back to Sweetwater, and you’ll never need think of me again.” Her voice cracked, and it was all she could do to keep from weeping. The thought of never seeing Hawk again, never watching him smile, never hearing his voice say her name—it was too much to bear. But bear it she would, for it was exactly what she deserved.

“What about the money?” he asked.

Lina shook her head. “I don’t want it. Not anymore. I thought I did, even this morning I thought I did. But it feels wrong to me now. It’s caused too much pain to too many people, including you. It was acquired illegally and no good can come of it.” She glanced up at him. “I’ll find some other way to help Matthew. We can go to a city and I can take work in a factory. At least that money will be honest, and it won’t have hurt anyone.”

Hawk was quiet. He didn’t care for her answer, and that was fine. She’d expected him not to believe her, and why should he?

“Please know I will always carry you in my heart. You were kinder to me than I deserved.” Lina gathered her skirts and stood. But just as she turned, a hand gripped her arm.

She turned back to see Hawk standing there.

“Don’t go,” he said, his voice rough at the edges. “Please.”

Lina looked down at his hand. “I don’t understand.”

He rubbed his other hand over his face. “It makes no sense, but I fell in love with you too. Please stay. We can start again, and maybe this time I can get to know the real Carolina Groves Rodgers.”

Lina’s breath went ragged in her throat. Had she heard him correctly? “Are you certain?”

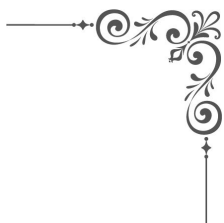
Hawk nodded, and finally, *thankfully*, he flashed her that smile she loved so much. Lina threw herself at him again, reveling in the feel of his arms holding her close.

She leaned back just a little to see his face. “I want you to know that you *do* know the real Lina. The only facts I kept from you were the identity of my father and the reason I came. The rest of what I shared about myself was all true.”

His smile grew broader. “Well, in that case . . .” He drew one hand away from her waist and used it to lift her chin.

Lina’s eyes fluttered shut as his lips met hers, and she knew in that moment she was forgiven. She vowed never to need to lie to him again. Then she sighed, and her mind stopped thinking at all as he deepened the kiss.

Her heart was his, for as long as he would have her.



Epilogue

THREE MONTHS LATER . . .

Lina paused outside the physician's office in Philadelphia. Light snowflakes drifted down, and she tightened her coat around herself.

"Matthew seemed enthusiastic about the treatment," Hawk said as he shut the door securely behind them.

Lina nodded. She was too. The doctor had said that potassium bromide was showing great promise in treating convulsions of the sort that Matthew had. "Thank you for agreeing to stay here for a few days," she said, resting her head on Hawk's shoulder. "I couldn't imagine leaving him alone in this city until we know how he'll react to the medication."

He wrapped an arm around her. "I couldn't either. Now let's get back to the hotel before we freeze."

They made their way down the steps and onto the sidewalk. This was a busy part of town, and no one seemed to mind the snow. It was quite beautiful, Lina decided. It gave the city a clean look, as if nothing could possibly mar it.

"I forgot to tell you that I had a letter from the buyers of your father's property," Hawk said, tucking Lina's arm safely under his.

"Oh?"

"Garland forwarded it here and the man at the front desk had it when I went downstairs this morning. He included a note saying that Frankie was doing well staying with him."

Lina smiled at that news. Frankie was what they'd named the dog they'd brought back down from the Pass. He'd settled in on their hearth and hadn't left since—until he'd needed to stay with Deputy Garland while Lina and Hawk were gone to Philadelphia.

"Anyhow, that couple that bought the land said they've

purchased some cattle from a neighbor who was selling out to go to California and they are optimistic for the spring.”

Lina grinned. “I’m glad you kept that key.”

Back in Perseverance, Hawk had shown her the items Papa had on him when he’d died. His guns had been sold, but Hawk had kept a small bag with an even smaller key inside, along with a bent and creased prayerbook with a leather cover and a photograph of Lina’s mother—identical to the one she’d kept in Sweetwater. They were behind the bags Lina had searched in the wardrobe, shoved into the corner at the very bottom where Lina hadn’t seen them.

Lina had cherished the photo and the prayerbook, but the key had stumped them both. Hawk consulted with the smithy, who said it looked like a bank key to him. With that information, they’d gone to San Luis, the nearest town with a bank and made inquiries. The key did indeed come from the bank, and it went to a lockbox taken out in the name of one Joseph Groves.

Lina hadn’t wanted to open it at first. She was certain it was the money, and the thought of using what felt like blood money to her had grown more and more despicable by the day. But Hawk persuaded her otherwise, and Lina finally agreed to open the box. Simply looking at the money wouldn’t convince her to spend it. She’d sooner return it to the companies he’d robbed, or donate it to some charity.

But there wasn’t a single bill or coin in the lockbox. Instead, they found the deed to a piece of land that bordered the New Mexico Territory—and a letter to Lina and Matthew.

Seeing her father’s handwriting again had taken Lina’s breath away and made tears spring to her eyes. She’d passed the letter to Hawk and asked him to read it aloud while she wrapped her arms around herself. In it, Papa explained that while he’d entered the outlaw life with the best of intentions, he’d come to realize he couldn’t justify his actions any longer—even to help his children. Fearing he wouldn’t survive much longer, he’d taken everything he’d saved up and given it away. The only thing that remained was the deed to a property he’d won fair and square in a poker game. But even that felt like too much to keep. He tried to return the deed to the man he’d won it from, but the fellow was dead and had no living kin. And so, this deed now belonged to Lina and Matthew, his children, to do with it as they saw fit. He hoped it might be enough to sell to help Matthew and provide them with enough funds with

which to live.

Lina had wasted no time. With Hawk's help, they sold the property almost immediately, and now, as a result, Matthew might be able to live a better life.

She let her hand fall to grasp Hawk's. His grip was strong, even through both pairs of winter gloves. Snowflakes fell and melted onto his hat and the dark hair that curled beneath it. He watched her as if he could never get enough of simply seeing her. Despite the cold outside, Lina went warm. She would never tire of looking at him either, of listening to him or discovering new things about him.

"I'm happy to see Matthew settled here for a time," she said, "But I cannot wait to return home."

"And leave all of this . . . snow . . . behind?" Hawk gave the snowflakes a frown, and Lina laughed. Having grown up in Texas, her husband had never become one who cared for cold winters.

"It is likely snowing at home too," Lina said, squeezing his hand with hers.

"No, I refuse to believe that," Hawk said with a grimace.

Lina laughed. "The snow isn't the reason I can't wait to go home, though."

"Is it cooking for prisoners? I'm certain you miss that a great deal, and that Mrs. Garner cannot wait to give up the extra business," Hawk teased.

"It is not." Lina bumped against his side. "No, the reason I look forward to home is that I hope once we are settled, we might soon have a little family of our own." She looked up at him, hoping he might be happy with the idea. With everything that had happened, they hadn't yet spoken of children.

But she needn't have worried. Hawk smiled as he never had before. "I believe I like the sound of that. A houseful of boys! Just think of it."

"Only boys?" Lina gave him a doubtful look. "How about some girls?"

"Maybe one," Hawk said, and the lift of his lips at the corner let her know he was teasing her again.

"Ha! I imagine now we'll only have girls. Just think of all those ribbons and dolls and beaux—"

"Beaux?" A crease in Hawk's forehead appeared, and Lina dissolved into laughter.

“How about we simply make it home first?” she said.

“That sounds good.” And right there, in the middle of the sidewalk in Philadelphia where not a soul knew who they were, Hawk laid a kiss on Lina’s lips.

“Every single one of those girls is going to know how to shoot,” he said as he pulled away.

“Of course they are,” Lina agreed.

And all the way back to the hotel she imagined their children, boys and girls, some with hair as dark as Hawk’s, others with eyes like hers and Papa’s. All of them theirs to love.

A family, forever.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR reading Hawk and Lina’s story! There are more books in the Sheriff’s Mail Order Bride series to discover. The next book is *A Bride for Richard* by Elissa Strati.

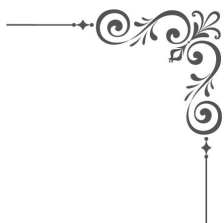
Lina’s brother Matthew had epilepsy, which was a very misunderstood condition historically and often resulted in people who suffered from it being committed to asylums for the mentally ill. The late nineteenth century finally began to see progress toward treating epilepsy, but it would still be years before it was truly understood.

I owe a special thank you to Wren Woodland, Delinda Peterson, and Patricia LaDuke, who named the locations in this book. I also want to thank Vana Trail, Wendy Ory, and Sandy Sorola for naming the bad guys in the story. And as always, thank you to all of my loyal readers. You all are the reason I keep writing and I feel so lucky to have you!

If you’re new to my books and you enjoyed this one, you might also like my Gilbert Girls series, which is set on the other side of the mountains from this book. The first book in that series is *Building Forever*.

To be alerted about my new books, sign up here: <http://bit.ly/catsnewsletter> I give subscribers a free download of *Forbidden Forever*, a Gilbert Girls prequel novella. You’ll also get sneak peeks at upcoming books, insights into the writer life, discounts and deals, inspirations, and so much more. I’d love to have you join the fun!

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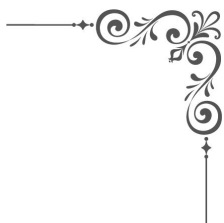
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About the Author, Cat Cahill

A SUNSET. SNOW ON THE mountains. A roaring river in the spring. A man and a woman who can't fight the love that pulls them together. The danger and uncertainty of life in the Old West. This is what inspires me to write. I hope you find an escape in my books!

I live with my family and a houseful of dogs and cats in Kentucky. When I'm not writing, I'm losing myself in a good book, planning my next travel adventure, doing a puzzle, attempting to garden, or wrangling my kids.